

Witness

Daily Devotionals

Believers
FELLOWSHIP

Biblical Witnesses
Part 2



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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Pastoral Resident

Vibia Perpetua

4/30/2018 (Monday)

Vibia Perpetua was a Christian noblewoman, who lived with her husband, son, and her slave Felicitas in the city of Carthage.

Entries of her diary, and the additions of a biographer were combined to form *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, which describes her experiences. It's an important writing both because of its description of Perpetua's martyrdom, and because one of the few surviving documents written by a women in that time.

As a young mother in church in Carthage, Perpetua and several companions were accused of practicing Christianity, were tried for refusing to worship the emperor, and when they refused to renounce their faith they were sentenced to death in the arena.

What makes Perpetua's martyrdom especially impactful is its demonstration of the cost that living a Christian faith can take on the family of a believer.

Despite being an unbeliever himself, Perpetua's father was beaten because her refusal to renounce her faith. Perpetua's child was taken from her, because Perpetua's refusal to renounce her faith. Her family's standing in the community was tarnished by her faith, and through it all she remained steadfast.

Perpetua's life demonstrates to contemporary Christians a faith that sacrifices all for the cause of Christ. Not just goods, or comfort, or safety, but even things as dear and praiseworthy as family.

What very good gift that you have been given would be the most difficult to give up for the cause of Christ?

5/1/2018 (Tuesday)

It's easy to put Martyrs into the category of "long-ago, extreme, and unlikely." Realistically, in Gig Harbor, the likelihood that we will be thrown to wild animals is pretty much non-existent. We don't even have a zoo.

While we understand intellectually that people around the world still suffering persecution, torture, and death, those realities can seem like a far-off impossibility. Sometimes it can be hard to connect with the lives of these brothers and sisters in faith, because their experiences seem so drastically different from our own.

In the martyrdom of Perpetua, we see a number of elements that we can easily distance ourselves from. She is thrown to wild beasts, she faces execution in front of a crowd, she's tortured for the cause of Christ, and ultimately killed. Perpetua is unrelenting in the face of adversity, a heroically and unapologetically steadfast witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time, her witness should cause to think about the cost that following Christ might bring to our families and our loved ones.

Family ties can be broken, opportunities might be lost. More than just an exemplar of courage, Perpetua's reminds us that following Christ can cost us more than just our lives.

Matthew 6:24 tells us, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."

Reflect today on what is it about the life we have in Christ that makes it worth such a high cost? What are you truly devoted to?

5/2/2018 (Wednesday)

While in prison for her faith, Perpetua's father was allowed to visit her so that he could convince her to give up her convictions and come home.

Her father said to her, "Have pity my daughter, on my grey hairs. Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called a father by you... Have regard to your brothers, have regard to your mother and your aunt, have regard to your son, who will not be able to live after you. Lay aside your courage, and do not bring us all to destruction..."

One of the heaviest costs that we may be called to endure might not be bodily death or harm, but seeing our loved one's in pain. Alongside the call to die to self, scripture also warns us that we'll have to die to others as well. Luke 14:33 tells us, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

Perpetua's father didn't want to hurt her, and from what we read he cared a great deal for her, but he didn't understand the relationship she had with God. Perpetua's faith ultimately cost her not only her own life, but the relationships she had with her father, brothers, mother, aunt, and her young son.

What is it about these Christians that gave them the courage to sacrifice all for the cause of Christ?

Reflect today on the call to be a witness of the gospel, and what it is that keeps us following Jesus despite that high cost.

5/3/2018 (Thursday)

“We were in the hands of our persecutors, when my father, out of the affection he bore me, made new efforts to shake my resolution. I said to him: ‘Can that vessel, which you see, change its name?’ He said: ‘No.’ I replied: ‘Nor can I call myself any other than I am, that is to say, a Christian.’”

Being referred to as a Christian can seem like a hard label to wear in a time where it has so many different interpretations. Do we mean Christian like Jesus, or Christian like Westboro Baptist? Saying that you believe in Jesus can be one of the most controversial labels we wear.

Perpetua’s response to her father orients us to a truth that we see laid out in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

As Christians, our association with the gospel should be the most unchangeable aspect of who we are. When we represent the love of God poured out on all people, to any who would receive it, there isn’t room for misinterpretation of Jesus’ message.

The gospel message itself can be scandalous, but that shouldn’t be because of anything we add to it. The reality that the God of the universe bound himself to us, loves us, and wants to be in relationship with us is plenty exciting without adding things to it.

As we live out our witness, it’s important to remember that there is nothing shameful about the gospel. There are people that misrepresent the truth of Jesus in many ways, but we are forever devoted to his name, to his witness, and to his mission.

5/4/2018 (Friday)

“By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.”
Acts 3:16.

Whether it’s through the unrelenting faith of the Martyrs, or in the miraculous healing of a man born unable to walk, the evidence of the Holy Spirit confronts us with the need for a response.

We can choose to ignore the healing of a man born unable to walk, or we can acknowledge it as God at work. We can choose to ignore the witness of Christians who have gone before us, we can dismiss it as the actions of the extremely devout, or as the impossibly faithful, or we can acknowledge God at work.

So how do we respond when we are confronted by the miraculous? What do you do when the power of God, or the truth of God, or the love of God is clearly displayed?

Reflect today on times when you have seen God move in your life or through the lives of those around you. How did you respond?

5/5/2018 (Saturday)

At the end of the account of Perpetua's martyrdom the narrative shifts from her personal account to the voice of an editor/narrator who describes the final moments of her life. It's in this final reflection that we receive a reminder of what we are actually seeing in martyrdom.

We read, "For these new manifestations of virtue will bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates, and to God the Father almighty, to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom is splendor and immeasurable power for all the ages. Amen."

We know that the Holy Spirit still animates our lives, still gives us courage to face the tasks before us, comforts us, instructs us, and enables us to bear witness.

We know that the opposition we face in this life will not defeat us, and as we follow Jesus, even to death, we know that God holds us safely in his hands.

Revelation 12:11 tells us, "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."

Our ultimate victory has already been won, and the blood of the Lamb has defeated the power of sin and death.

Today, remember that our future has already been secured, our ultimate battle has already been won, and we can live as manifestations of virtue that bear witness to the Holy Spirit because of Jesus' death on our behalf.

Polycarp of Smyrna

5/7/2018 (Monday)

Polycarp's of Smyrna was one of the oldest living students of a disciple, having been taught by the apostle John, Much of his life was spent fighting the misunderstandings about Jesus that plagued the early church, and his only existing writing speaks to the importance of fighting those who would deny the cross.

As a contemporary of the theologian Ignatius, and a teacher of the theologian Irenaeus, Polycarp held a prominent role in the early church. When the Roman government began to persecute those who would not worship the emperor, Polycarp was warned that he had been targeted and would be arrested. Instead of running however, he waited for the soldiers to arrive at his home, invited them in, and fed them.

When the time for his martyrdom arrived, Polycarp demonstrated a sound defense of the gospel, an unrelenting commitment to the gospel, and a deep reliance on the strength that God gave him. During his life he spoke out against the heresies that threatened the early church, taught the next generation of theologians what had been passed on to him, and remained steadfast in the face of execution.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 we read, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter."

Polycarp's willingness to stand firm was demonstrated both in his life, and in his death. How are you being challenged to stand firm today?

5/8/2018 (Tuesday)

Following his arrest for refusing to worship Caesar, Polycarp was questioned and threatened by the Proconsul Statius Quadratus.

From an initial appeal to his old age, and an acknowledgment of his venerability in the community, the trial quickly devolved into a harsher tone. “I have wild animals here,” the Proconsul said. “I will throw you to them if you do not repent.” “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil.”

One of the surest signs that you are losing an argument is if you threaten violence to get your point across.

Even as this threat was especially vivid to Polycarp, who had witnessed the martyrdom of fellow Christians in the past, it demonstrated the weakness of the Proconsul’s position.

In John 16:33, we read, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

The threats and gestures of rulers and systems that oppose the gospel only demonstrate their inability to affect an outcome that was long-since decided through the cross. Jesus has already overcome the world.

Reflect today on the reality that Jesus has already overcome the world. Where is that easy to believe? Where do you have a hard time believing that?

5/9/2018 (Wednesday)

When the Proconsul Statius Quadratus threatened to throw Polycarp to wild animals, he refused to waver. As the trial continued, the Proconsul suggested an ever more painful death. “If you despise the animals, I will have you burned.”

Much like the threat to be thrown to the wild animals, being burned to death was a terrifying reality that Polycarp would have witnessed first hand.

Polycarp responded, “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.”

Far from false bravado, Polycarp’s boldness was rooted in the expectation that comes from a life lived in accordance with the gospel.

1 Peter 4:12 reminds us, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

We should expect that there will be trials that we experience as we live a life of faith. The decision to follow Jesus means that we will often be at odds with a world that has decided to follow something else.

To be a witness to the gospel of Jesus means that we should expect the difficulties associated with that witness. What sort of consequences has your faith had in your life?

5/10/2018 (Thursday)

When asked again to renounce his faith in Jesus, Polycarp replied, “86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

After eighty-six years of contending for the gospel, it’s fair to say that Polycarp would have encountered some suffering. Having led a church for sixty years, during a time when it was illegal to worship Jesus, it’s easy to imagine some of the hardships he might have seen. But at the end of it all, he seemed unable to do anything but be Jesus’ witness.

Similarly, Acts 4:19-20 tells us, “But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

The sort of “I can’t help but speak” devotion, only comes from a lifelong relationship with the living God. After decades of being drawn daily into the image and likeness of Christ, it’s no wonder that Polycarp so clearly demonstrates a Christ-like faithfulness near the end of his life. It’s also no wonder that the question of blaspheming his King, is laughable.

If you’ve walked with someone for a lifetime, and they’ve always been loving, always been faithful, always been true, then an otherwise monumental decision between death and betraying them starts to look pretty silly. The many years of Polycarp’s life lived in service to Christ, formed him into someone very Christ like.

For those of us who are in relationship with Jesus, we trust the promise that we are being reformed, day by day, into someone more Christ like. He is faithful to begin what he started in you.

5/11/2018 (Friday)

“Immediately the irons with which the pyre was equipped were fastened round him, but when they tried to nail him as well, he said, ‘Let me be. He who gives me strength to endure the fire will also grant me to stay on the pyre unflinching even without your making sure of it with nails.’ So they did not nail him, but only tied him up”

Polycarp showed his executors that what held him to his conviction was much stronger than nails. What kept him there when fire surrounded him was nothing so impermanent as nails, it was the strength of God.

Imagine a life lived with this kind of reliance, imagine trusting God so fully that we could endure any hardships pressed on us, and glorify God in our steadfastness. Polycarp’s martyrdom is memorable, and even admirable, but not because of his own ability to stand fast. Polycarp is an exemplar to us because he knew the source of his strength and trusted in God even as faced a fiery execution.

When we are bound up with Christ, facing the consequences of our association with him, we can take courage in the fact that it is God’s strength that enables us to stand firm.

Psalm 46:1-3 says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah”

Whether your consequences are similar to Polycarp’s or something less severe, know that God has promised to be your strength.

5/12/2018 (Saturday)

“But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true” (Against Heresies 3.3.4).

Polycarp's life was a marathon of faithfulness, stretching from 69 AD to 155 AD. In addition to Irenaeus' recounting of his life, he served as the bishop of Smyrna for almost six decades, fought against the myriad heresies that arose in the church during that time, and was especially effective in combatting the Marcionite heresies that arose in that time.

When he received word that he was to be tried and potentially martyred, it would have been easy for him to leave quietly having accomplished so much for the cause of Christ. Instead, he stayed and was burnt alive for the cause of Christ. In 2 Timothy 4:7, near his own death, Paul writes, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Like Paul, and like Polycarp, you and I are called to an endurance that bears witness to the truth of Jesus. There is no retirement from the gospel call, we are forever bearing witness to the truth of the gospel, or diminishing it in our silences. Ask yourself today where you have given up your witness, where you have already “done enough”, or where you're too weary to continue.

Where are you still being asked to fight the good fight? To finish well? To keep the faith?

Justin Martyr

5/21/2018 (Monday)

Justin was a second-century philosopher who became a Christian and then defended the movement from attacks against its belief and practices.

Born in Samaria in 103 AD, Justin studied Stoicism, philosophy, and Plato, but was dissatisfied with the Greek philosophers' beliefs and lifestyles. When Justin was about thirty years old, he converted to Christianity and began writing philosophical treatises defending the faith. Three of Justin's works have survived: First Apology, Second Apology, and Dialogue with Trypho.

In Justin's day, most Romans did not know much about Christianity. The Romans thought that Christians were immoral—that their worship services involved incest (they call each other “brother” and “sister”) and cannibalism (they eat bodies and drink blood). They thought that the church was an insurrectionist movement, hoping to overturn Rome in favor of their own kingdom. Finally, the Romans thought that Christians disrespected the Roman gods and promoted silly superstitions. Since Christianity was still a young movement, these accusations threatened to squash it before it ever got traction. Justin defended the church and cleared up misunderstandings.

Justin was martyred for his faith when one of his rival philosophers accused him of being an “atheist” (one who didn't believe in the Roman gods). When Justin refused to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods, he was beheaded.

Justin's life teaches us that Christianity is philosophically defensible. Have you ever been discouraged by others who have suggested that Christianity is foolish? How might Justin's courage strengthen your faith?

5/22/2018 (Tuesday)

Justin Martyr wrote at a time when Christianity was under attack for being foolish and immoral. There was much misunderstanding about the new faith, and Justin showed that it was intellectually and morally serious.

In his First Apology, Justin exposed that most of the claims against Christians were based on ignorance. For instance, Christians were accused of promoting incest because they called each other “brother” and “sister.” Justin clarified for the Romans Jesus’ teaching on chastity, righteousness, love, patience, civil obedience, trust in God, and hope for an eternal kingdom. He showed that Christianity was good for society.

Justin also advocated for Christianity’s philosophical plausibility. For instance, the resurrection was considered a silly doctrine. How could people who were eaten by animals be resurrected? There was nothing left of their bodies! Justin argued that while this was impossible for men, all things were possible for God. Jesus himself was resurrected, so Justin argued that God could reform and renew even those whose bodies had been destroyed.

Finally, Justin argued that the Greek philosophers promoted immorality, and that Jesus was a morally superior teacher. Ultimately, this is what got him killed by rival philosophers who resented his attacks.

Justin’s defenses of Christianity helped save the young movement from being squashed by Greco-Roman philosophers. Having studied Greek and Roman philosophy, he was convinced of Christianity’s superiority and he laid down his life for the truth.

Justin searched diligently for truth and found it in Jesus. How has Jesus helped you better understand life? How could you share that story with others?

5/23/2018 (Wednesday)

In First Apology 2, Justin wrote about the pursuit of truth:

“Reason directs those who are truly pious and philosophical to honor and love only what is true, declining to follow traditional opinions, if these be worthless. For not only does sound reason direct us to refuse the guidance of those who did or taught anything wrong, but it is incumbent on the lover of truth, by all means, and if death be threatened, even before his own life, to choose to do and say what is right.”

We see in this quote the driving passion of Justin’s life: the pursuit of truth. Justin didn’t think the traditions of Greco-Roman philosophy and tradition had value if they weren’t true. The truth of the gospel was worth pursuing with everything, even if it led to death.

Jesus told us, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 ESV). The pursuit of truth is only satisfied in Jesus.

How has the truth of Jesus been better to you than the falsehood of the world?

5/24/2018 (Thursday)

In First Apology 11, Justin wrote about the nature of the kingdom of God:

“For if we looked for a human kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off; since also death is a debt which must at all events be paid.”

Justin reminded us that our hope can give us courage in life. He said that if our hope was only in this life, then we should do whatever necessary to preserve our life. But since our hope is in resurrection and the kingdom of God, we don't have to be afraid of what people can do to us.

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:23–25 ESV)

Is there something you are afraid of right now? How might your future hope affect the way you view your fears?

5/25/2018 (Friday)

“So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’”

(Acts 4:18–20 ESV)

In Acts 4, the rulers of Israel charge Peter and John not to speak in the name of Jesus. Remember, these are the same people who orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus.

They had all of the religious authority and political power in the land. And yet, Peter and John were not afraid of them. The way they saw it, God was responsible for everything that happened surrounding Jesus, so they had no choice but to proclaim it! They would not disobey God to obey religious leaders.

Have you ever been so moved by the work of God that you couldn't help but proclaim what He had done for you?

How might you better remember God's works in your life?

5/26/2018 (Saturday)

In Acts 4, Peter and John are so moved by the truth of the resurrection that they boldly confront the religious leadership.

They tell the elders: “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:8–12 ESV)

The truth of the resurrection compelled them to act boldly. Similarly, Justin was so convinced of the truth of Christianity that he was not afraid to die. He thought it was better to pursue the truth to death rather than settle for a lie. Further, because he hoped for a future kingdom, he wasn’t afraid of what men could do to him in this life.

How has God worked in your life? How has the truth of the gospel changed you? How can this truth and this power give you confidence to witness for God?

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