

Witness

Daily Devotionals

Believers
FELLOWSHIP

Biblical Witnesses
Part 3



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.

Jeremiah Hinton
Pastoral Resident

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

5/28/2018 (Monday)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor, author, writer, and eventual martyr who lived during World War II. Born into an aristocratic family in Breslau, modern day Wroclaw Poland, Bonhoeffer disappointed his family by deciding at the age of 14 to become a minister and theologian.

He graduated from the University of Berlin in 1927, pursued and studied at New York's Union Theological Seminary before returning to lecture at the University of Berlin.

The environment he found himself in upon returning to Germany was one of frenzied nationalism and public support of the Nazi party, even among Christian theologians. The German Church, accepted and cooperated with the demands the Nazi party placed on the church. Many protestants made what they saw as necessary compromises and adapted their theology accordingly.

Bonhoeffer's life was a testament to resistance against the watering down of the gospel. Through preaching, teaching, writing, non-violent dissent, subterfuge, and ultimately direct action against the Nazi party, Bonhoeffer resisted. His writings bear the mark of a theologian deeply concerned with the life of the church, and the relationship that individual members of the body have with God.

His willingness to act against the Nazi party led him to join the German Secret Service as a double agent, working to help Jews escape Nazi oppression. He was eventually discovered, and accused of crimes against the state. He was executed on April 9th 1945 at the extermination camp at Flossenbürg.

Consider today what would have been more difficult for you, to live for the gospel in the face of Nazi violence, or to live for the gospel in the face of societal disapproval.

5/29/2018 (Tuesday)

“Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization.”

With the benefit of hindsight, it's easy to acknowledge that the German people's participation with the Nazi party was contrary to the gospel. However, the incremental movement from faithful adherence to the gospel of Jesus, into a nationalist religion that elevated the German people above all others is by no means an isolated incident.

We face the question, in small everyday ways, who we will ultimately serve. At some point there is a decision of loyalty to be made between the very good things we enjoy, and God. For the German people, the decision to elevate patriotism from a good thing to a God thing had disastrous results.

Philippians 3:20 reminds us, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” Pride in our home, a desire to celebrate heritage, and even a preference for our way of life aren't necessarily bad things, but when we forget where our citizenship is, when we elevate good things to God things, we are in danger of repeating a very dangerous mistake.

What are some good things that you are tempted to elevate into God things in your own life?

5/30/2018 (Wednesday)

Bonhoeffer's studies brought him to America during the rise of the Nazi party. He had every opportunity to remain in the safety of America, but instead chose to return home.

“I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

His decision led him down a path that would culminate in his execution by the Nazi party, a possibility that he would have been well aware of. Instead of self-preservation, Bonhoeffer was motivated by the desire to rebuild the church in Germany. Galatians 6:2 tells us, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

In his particular context, and with the particular equipping that he had received, Bonhoeffer was well prepared to minister to the German church. His theological training allowed him to combat the lies that had infested church doctrine, and contend for the truth of the gospel.

While Bonhoeffer could have stayed safely off in the distance and written insightful arguments, his witness was more powerful for his willingness to incarnate his words. He practiced what he preached.

Where have you been equipped for the gospel? How have you been challenged to practice what you preach?

5/31/2018 (Thursday)

One of the ways that Bonhoeffer resisted the Nazi presence in Germany was by conducting an underground seminary. Traveling from one eastern German village to another, Bonhoeffer taught the pastors of the small, illegally held churches that met in rural areas.

While the Gestapo shut down the physical site where his seminary was hosted, they couldn't stop him from cultivating a community of students and pastors. In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer wrote in length about the ways that Christians can, and should, share their lives with one another.

While figuring out just how to do this takes intentionality, Bonhoeffer also warned, "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."

The illegal meetings he had with rural pastors in East Germany was probably not what Bonhoeffer would have described as his "dream community." But instead of rejecting this group as not somehow lacking, he poured into the people that God had placed around him.

Christian community is not so much about whether or not people meet the criteria we have for "good community", but whether or not we love them well enough for community to develop.

Where have you experienced authentic community in your life? Where have you been unwilling to love those around you enough for it to develop?

6/1/2018 (Friday)

“But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.” Acts 5:1-2

A common temptation of the church, past and present, is the desire to appear more spiritually mature than we actually are.

While spiritual maturity isn't a bad thing, when the acquisition of righteousness becomes more important than living it out, we've confused the means for the end. To be seen as holy, as pure, or even just as correct, can so blind Christians that we forget the reason we pursue righteousness in the first place.

In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer speaks to this false “piety” saying, “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!”

Like Ananias and Sapphire, we often pretend to be more mature, or more sinless than we actually are. However it is the willingness to acknowledge our sins, to confess what we've done, and where we've fallen short and cling to the righteousness of Christ that is the cornerstone of the gospel.

Consider today where you have an opportunity to live more authentically. To reject the temptation of seeming sinless, and to acknowledge the need for Christ.

6/2/2018 (Saturday)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to the scaffold on 9 April 1945 in the Flossenburg concentration camp. Before being arrested two years earlier, he had every opportunity to remain safely tucked away in any number of countries that were safe from persecution.

Instead, Bonhoeffer's theological convictions of what it meant to imitate an incarnational God drove him to participate in the suffering of the church. As we serve a profoundly participatory God, who does not stay far away but joins with us, so too should Christians participate. While his actions can be seen as the living out of his theological convictions, Bonhoeffer understood that the Christian life was only possible through the work of Jesus.

In his *Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer writes, "It is only because he became like us that we can become like him." While the lives of martyrs often serve as a challenge, or an encouragement to us, Bonhoeffer's life dares us to take our theology seriously.

Ephesians 5:1-2 says, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

If we truly believe that Christ's sacrifice on our behalf was costly, that grace is not cheaply given, how can we pretend that being a disciple of Christ will not also be costly? The memorial to Bonhoeffer at the church in Flossenburg reads, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer - a witness of Jesus Christ among his brethren."

Consider today what it means to be an authentic witness of Jesus Christ.

Janani Luwum

6/4/2018 (Monday)

Janani Luwum was born in 1922 into the Acholi tribe, near the northern part of modern Uganda. In 1948 Luwum had a conversion experience while listening to evangelists who were a part of the great East African Revival.

Almost immediately after his conversion, Luwum began to preach. Speaking of his conversion, Luwum later wrote, "I suddenly found myself climbing a tree to tell those in the school compound to repent and turn to Jesus Christ...The reality of Jesus overwhelmed me - and it still does."

Less than a year after his conversion, Luwum responded to another sermon, and devoted his life to the ministry of the church.

Luwum's selflessness, and willingness to engage honestly with those in his charge led to him rising in position and authority in Uganda, ultimately becoming the archbishop of Uganda in 1974. The political climate was especially volatile at the time, and Luwum was called on as both a spiritual leader, and as a liason to Idi Amin, the Ugandan dictator who had seized power.

As Amin's regime grew more and more brutal, Luwum publicly spoke against his actions, directly opposing Amin's brutality. In response, Amin had Luwum and two Christian cabinet members shot behind closed doors. While Luwum could have remained silent, he instead took up the cause of his people and addressed the evil he saw. His leadership encouraged Christians to confront issues of both church and state, regardless of the consequences.

Consider today how you have been given the opportunity to confront wrongdoing. Where do you have the opportunity to speak up?

6/5/2018 (Tuesday)

In July of 1998, Janani Luwum joined ten other statues of 20th century Martyrs on the West Wall of Westminster Abby in London. On February 16th the entire country of Uganda celebrates a national holiday in honor of Archbishop Janani Luwum.

While he is one of many martyrs who have given their lives for the cause of Christ, Luwum has been especially celebrated because of his willingness to contend for justice and human rights, without watering down his conviction to the gospel.

In Matthew 25:40 Jesus tells his disciples “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” And later in 25:45 “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

The ability to show care for the people that a country calls expendable, unimportant, or lacking value is shockingly rare. The Christians call to serve and love “the least of these” is as countercultural today as it was in Jesus’ time. For Luwum, this meant contending for the people who suffered at the hands of a tyrant, those who were jailed without cause, those who weren’t a part of the right political party, and those who couldn’t afford to pay for their problems to go away.

It’s not a new concept that we should be contending for “the least of these”, but it is so remarkable when it happens that both Christians and non-Christians take notice. Janani Luwum lived the kind of life that an entire nation paid attention to, and died as a witness to the gospel that characterized his life.

Look around you today for “the least of these.” What would it look like to contend for them?

6/6/2018 (Wednesday)

A recurring aspect of Luwum's witness was his willingness to speak fearlessly to those in power. Recently after converting, Luwum was speaking at an open-air rally where he charged his listeners to turn away from excessive drinking and smoking and to instead follow Christ.

Luwum also called out the local church leaders for tolerating the evil that existed in the community. The next day, at the instigation of church leaders, Luwum and several others were charged with disturbing the peace. After being jailed without food for two days, their captor promised them food if they would stop disturbing the peace.

Luwum responded, "We have not disturbed any peace. Our Savior is the Prince of Peace and he wants you to know that he loves you." Luwum and his friends exhorted their captors to turn to Christ so much that they eventually freed them and sent them home. Luke 16:10 reads, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much." While Luwum would eventually be in a position to address the dictator of a nation, his faithfulness to the gospel did not start on that day.

It's much easier to say that we'd be faithful in the one big moment, than to recognize the many small moments we have the opportunity to be faithful in. Our own witness does not have to begin with calling out national injustices, it can begin with being a willing witness to the gospel in our own backyards.

Where have you been called to be faithful in a very little thing?
Where is God encouraging you to be a witness today?

6/7/2018 (Thursday)

While much of the church in Uganda at the time was unwilling to participate in worldly systems of power, Luwum believed that the church had an important role to play in these systems. He believed that instead of a complete separation from the world, Christianity could mean not a renunciation, but a sanctification of power.

His willingness to engage with government officials, to meet with them, share their concerns, and to be in relationship with them was criticized by some Christians in his community.

Luwum responded by saying, “I live as though there will be no tomorrow. I face daily being picked up by the soldiers. While the opportunity is there, I preach the gospel with all my might, and my conscience is clear before God that I have not sided with the present government, which is utterly self-seeking. I have been threatened many times. Whenever I have the opportunity I have told the President the things the churches disapprove of. God is my witness.”

There will be times when our willingness to speak to, or associate with particular groups will cause us to come under criticism by those who are unwilling to do so. Luwum’s response holds in tension both the call in Romans 13:1 to be subject to the government, and the reminder in Acts 5:29 that our ultimate allegiance is to God.

Luwum was able to say, “God is my witness” because he had a clear conscience surrounding his willingness to interact with the government.

Consider today the places where you have a clear conscience, and the places where you may have momentarily treated something other than God as your ultimate allegiance.

6/8/2018 (Friday)

In Acts 5, the apostles have been arrested by the Sadducees because of their witness in front of Solomon's Portico (v. 12). Motivated by jealousy, the Sadducees placed them in jail in the hopes of silencing them.

A common tactic of leaders who are insecure in their power is silencing opposing voices. Righteous leaders have no need to silence opposition, because the truth will always prevail, and opposition rooted in injustice cannot endure.

For the apostles, being jailed was just a brief prelude to the continued proclamation of the gospel, as they were freed soon after. For Ugandans in the 1970's however, imprisonment was a much more widespread, and much longer lasting problem. One of the ways that Janani Luwum lived out the gospel was through fighting against the injustices he saw within his country.

While speaking with a young lawyer, Luwum once said, "We must be Christ to these people: be our advocate and take up their cases. The local prison is filled to capacity with innocent people suspected of opposing the government."

A lived witness is a powerful message. It's much easier to describe the selfless love of Christ, than it is to demonstrate it. Imagine all the dangers to the young lawyer if he chose to be Christ to those imprisoned. Imagine the risk of associating with people who have been found guilty by a dictator.

Consider today what you would say about what it means to be Christ to someone, and then consider what you would actually do to be Christ to someone.

6/9/2018 (Saturday)

On February 16th, 1977 Janani Luwum and six other Ugandan bishops were accused of smuggling arms in opposition of the government. In a mock trial, President Amin outlined the actions that Luwum and the other bishops were said to have committed, never giving them a chance to respond.

The President ended by asking the crowd of soldiers gathered, "What shall we do with these traitors?" To which the soldiers responded, "Kill him now." The parallels between a falsely accused witness, a mock trial, and an angry mob demanding blood are all too easy to see.

Whether it's a Roman Bureaucrat, or a Ugandan dictator, the radical love of Christ demonstrated by his people is a threat to false power. As Luwum was taken away he reportedly turned to the other bishops gathered there and said, "Do not be afraid. I see God's hand in this."

The next morning it was announced that Luwum had died in a car crash. The truth was that he had been shot several times. In Acts 5 the apostles are imprisoned, miraculously escape, and ultimately recaptured for their witness. The officials decided to beat them instead of kill them, but their response is similar to the response of many martyrs throughout history.

Acts 5:41-42 reads, "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."

When we face discrimination, opposition, or persecution, we have the honor and the privilege of persevering alongside our brothers and sisters who have gone before us. No matter the opposition, don't stop being a witness to Jesus.

Wang Ming-Dao

6/11/2018 (Monday)

Wang Ming-Dao resisted communist control and inspired the underground house church movement in China. Born Wang Tie in 1900, he took the name Wang Ming-Dao (Ming means “testify” and Dao means “way” or “truth”) when he became an adult. He was imprisoned from 1958–1980 for refusing to join the state-controlled church and died in 1991.

Wang’s ministry began in the 1920s in Peking (modern Beijing) at the Christian Tabernacle. When Japanese invaders took control of Chinese churches in the 1930s, Wang resisted. He felt strongly that the church should not be “unequally yoked” with unbelievers, including the government. When the communists came to power they imposed further regulations on local churches, Wang continued to resist. In 1955, Wang and his wife were imprisoned. Wang was broken by the reeducation and confessed to several crimes related to not joining the Three-Selfs movement.

His “confession” secured his wife’s and his release, but he was re-arrested in 1958 for failing to join a government controlled church. This time, he received a life sentence and his wife received fifteen years.

In 1979, international human rights organizations pressured China to release Wang, but he refused to leave prison until the Chinese government apologized to him. The prison finally tricked him into leaving the grounds to debate baptism by sprinkling or immersion. As soon as he was outside, they locked the doors behind him.

Wang’s courage in the face of government persecution inspired a whole movement of the church. In what ways have you experienced opposition to your faith? How might you have courage?

6/12/2018 (Tuesday)

Wang Ming-Dao's courage inspired a movement of Chinese underground house churches that remain free from government control and influence. Both when he resisted Japanese occupiers and then later when he resisted the communists, Wang was committed to the freedom of the church.

Jesus insisted that his kingdom was distinct from worldly politics. At his trial, he told Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." The kingdoms of this world are never content to submit to the authority of Christ.

The world may partner with the church to achieve its own ends, or it may oppose the church for exposing its darkness, but it will not submit to Jesus. Wang Ming-Dao recognized that his true Lord was Jesus, and so he had nothing to fear from worldly lords.

His courage and commitment inspired a movement of Chinese Christians at a time when resisting the government came at a steep cost.

What does it mean to you that "Jesus' kingdom is not of this world"? When are you most prone to forget this? How might you better remember?

6/13/2018 (Wednesday)

When told that Japanese occupiers of China would kill a man as easily as they killed an ant, Wang replied, "What you say is true, but I am not an ant. I am the servant of the most high God. Unless God permits, no one can harm me."

(Noll and Nystrom, 249.) One of the reasons that Wang was able to resist so courageously was that he had absolute confidence in the sovereignty and power of God. At his trial, Jesus and Pontius Pilate talked about the nature of political power.

John 19:10–11 says, "So Pilate said to him, 'You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.'"

Like Jesus, Wang Ming-Dao recognized that worldly powers are always derivative of divine power. Worldly powers may rebel against God and act against his ways, but they can never thwart God's will. In the end, God will call all powers to account for how they have used their power.

What is one thing you are worried or concerned about right now? How does that thing compare to the will of God? How can knowing that you are a servant of the most-high God influence the way you face your worries?

6/14/2018 (Thursday)

Early in his ministry, Wang Ming-Dao faced a faith crisis that brought up childhood fears of death. He had been a teacher at a Presbyterian school, but was fired when he began to teach that baptism was for believers and should be done by immersion.

Discouraged and unemployed, Wang Ming-Dao spiraled into depression before a time of intense prayer and Bible study gave him new direction. He wrote, "All of a sudden my heart was opened wide and I grasped the fact that Christ could give eternal life to all who believe in Him. In him is life. . . . He Himself rose from the dead. . . . I realized that death was not to be feared."

This newfound courage was instrumental in his resistance of the communists. Jesus said in Matthew 10:28 (ESV), "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Wang Ming-Dao knew that whatever the government did to him, only God had power over his soul. This helped him persevere through over 20 years in prison.

What does it mean to you that in Jesus there is life? What is one thing you are worried or concerned about right now? How significant is that thing compared to the eternal life that is yours in Jesus?

6/15/2018 (Friday)

In Acts 6:1–7, a dispute arises in the early church about the care for widows. The Hellenists felt that their widows were being neglected by the Hebrews. These Hellenistic widows were likely Jewish women born outside of Israel (their mother tongue was Greek), but who moved to the Holy Land in their old age.

With no family to support them, they were dependent upon the church to survive, but they were being neglected by the Apostles. The Apostles recognized that they could not do everything, so they suggested appointing people to take over this important ministry. They say in verses 3–4 (ESV), “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The community agreed with the Apostles’ suggestion and they nominated seven men full of the Spirit. Verse 5 lists the first seven deacons, and they all have Greek names. They were all Hellenists! The church did not need the Apostles to do all of the work; they needed them to empower others to do the work of the ministry.

This empowerment led to diversity in the leadership and growth in the church. Further, in the chapters to come, two of these deacons (Stephen and Philip) played significant roles in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles.

Have you ever tried to do too much for others, when what they really needed was to be empowered to lead themselves? How might you better trust the Spirit to lead those around you instead of trying to save them yourself?

6/16/2018 (Saturday)

Acts 6 is a turning point in the life of the early church. Despite Jesus' charge in Acts 1:8 to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, the Apostles had remained in Jerusalem. In Acts 6, the Apostles hit their limit in ministry and were forced to raise up other leaders.

One of these leaders (Stephen) was martyred, scattering the church throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8). Another (Philip) preaches the gospel to the Samaritans (8:5) and to an Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26–40).

God used these leaders to take the kingdom where the Apostles were unable to go on their own. In the same way, God used Wang Ming-Dao's courage in the face of government opposition to stir a movement in China.

In his thirty years of public ministry, Wang preached to thousands of people in hundreds of churches across China. He published a journal of his sermons called *Spiritual Food*, which reached many more. His arrest in 1955 signaled the end of his public ministry, and it would have been tempting to lament this tragedy as the end of God's work through Wang Ming-Dao.

But, through his courage in prison he was able to inspire a movement of house churches that reached millions across China. God did more through other Christians inspired by Wang than He did through Wang himself.

Who are you investing in right now? What will your legacy be?

The following resources were used for this devotional series:

Clouds of witnesses : Christian voices from Africa and Asia.

Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers

Ecclesiastical history of Eusebius Pamphilus:
Bishop of Casarea, in Palestine.
Foxe's book of martyrs.

The terrible alternative : Christian martyrdom in the twentieth century.

I am n : inspiring stories of Christians facing Islamic extremist.

Jesus Freaks

Life Together

Letters and Papers from Prison

The Cost of Discipleship

The story of Christianity, Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation.

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