

Winsome Witnesses: The Power of Personal Testimony



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 5:15–20, Mark 16:1–11, Acts 4:1–20, 1 John 1:1–3, Gal. 2:20, Acts 26:1–32.*

Memory Text: “‘For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’ ” (*Acts 4:20, NKJV*).

There is unusual power in a personal testimony. When our hearts are warmed by Christ's love and we are changed by His grace, we have something significant to say about Him. It is one thing to share what Jesus has done for someone else. It is quite another to share what He has done for us personally.

It is difficult to argue against personal experience. People may debate your theology or your interpretation of a text or even scoff at religion in general. But when an individual can say, “I once was hopeless but now have hope; I was filled with guilt but now have peace; I was purposeless but now have purpose,” even skeptics are impacted by the power of the gospel.

Although some people may experience sudden, dramatic conversions like the apostle Paul's on the Damascus Road, more often conversion occurs as a person has a growing recognition of the preciousness of Jesus, a deep appreciation for His amazing grace, and a supreme sense of gratitude for the salvation He freely offers. Christ radically refocuses our lives. It is this witness that the world so desperately needs and longs for.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 11.

Unlikely Witnesses

Read Mark 5:15–20. Why do you think Jesus sent the man into Decapolis to witness to his family and friends rather than nurturing him in his newfound faith by keeping him with Himself?

The word *Decapolis* comes from two words: *deca*, meaning ten, and *polis*, meaning city. The region of Decapolis was an area of ten cities along the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the first century. These cities were bound together by a common language and culture. The demoniac was known by many people in that region. He had struck fear into their hearts through his unpredictable, violent behavior. Jesus saw in him one who longed for something better, and so He miraculously delivered the man from the demons that tormented him.

When the townspeople heard that Jesus had permitted the demons to possess their herd of swine, and that the swine had run over a cliff into the sea, they came out to see what was taking place. Mark's Gospel records, "Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid" (*Mark 5:15, NKJV*). The man was whole again—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The essence of the gospel is to restore people broken by sin to the wholeness for which Christ has created them.

What better person to reach these ten cities of Decapolis than a transformed demoniac who could share his testimony with the entire region? Ellen G. White states it well: "As witnesses for Christ, we are to tell what we know, what we ourselves have seen and heard and felt. If we have been following Jesus step by step, we shall have something right to the point to tell concerning the way in which He has led us. We can tell how we have tested His promise, and found the promise true. We can bear witness to what we have known of the grace of Christ. This is the witness for which our Lord calls, and for want of which the world is perishing."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 340. God often uses unlikely witnesses who are changed by His grace to make a difference in our world.

What's your own story—that is, your own conversion story? What do you tell others about how you came to faith? What can you offer someone unconverted, who could benefit from the experience you can share?

Proclaiming the Risen Christ

It was early Sunday morning, and the two Marys hastily made their way to the tomb of Christ. They were not going to ask Him for anything. What could a dead man possibly give them? The last time they saw Him, His body was bloodied, bruised, and broken. The scenes of the Cross were deeply etched in their minds. Now they were simply doing their duty. Sorrowfully, they made their way to the tomb to embalm His body. The gloomy shadows of despondency engulfed their lives in the darkness of despair. The future was uncertain and offered little hope.

When they arrived at the tomb, they were startled to find it empty. Matthew records the events of that Resurrection morning in these words: “But the angel answered and said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen’ ” (*Matt. 28:5, 6, NKJV*).

The women were now overwhelmed with joy. Their dark clouds of sadness faded into the sunlight of the dawning of Resurrection morning. Their night of sadness was over. Gladness graced their countenances, and songs of rejoicing replaced their tears of lament.

Read Mark 16:1–11. What was Mary’s response when she discovered Christ had risen from the dead?

After Mary met the resurrected Christ, she ran to tell the story. Good news is for sharing, and she could not be silent. Christ was alive! His tomb was empty, and the world must know it. After we, too, meet the resurrected Christ along the highway of life, we, too, must run to tell the story, for good news is for sharing.

How fascinating, too, that despite all the times Jesus had told them what would happen, that He would be killed and then resurrected, the disciples—those ones Jesus specifically chose—refused to believe Mary’s testimony. “And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe” (*Mark 16:11, NKJV*). Thus, if even Jesus’ own disciples didn’t immediately believe, we shouldn’t be surprised if others don’t immediately accept our words either.

When was the last time you were rebuffed in your witness? How did you respond, and what have you learned from that experience?

Changed Lives Make a Difference

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” (*Acts 4:13, NKJV*).

The New Testament church exploded in growth. There were 3,000 baptized on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 2:41*). Thousands more were added to the church a few weeks later (*Acts 4:4*). Soon the authorities recognized what was happening. These New Testament believers had been with Christ. Their lives were changed. They were transformed by His grace, and they could not keep silent.

Read Acts 4:1–20. What happened here? What happened when the authorities tried to silence Peter and John? What was their response?

These believers were new in Christ, and they had to tell their story. Peter, a loudmouthed fisherman, was transformed by the grace of God. James and John, the sons of thunder who had difficulty controlling their tempers, were transformed by the grace of God. Thomas the skeptic was transformed by the grace of God. The disciples and members of the early church each had their own stories to tell, and they could not keep silent. Notice this powerful statement by Ellen G. White in the book *Steps to Christ*: “No sooner does one come to Christ than there is born in his heart a desire to make known to others what a precious friend he has found in Jesus; the saving and sanctifying truth cannot be shut up in his heart.”—Page 78.

Notice, too, what the religious leaders said in Acts 4:16. They openly acknowledged the reality of the miracle that had been performed—the healed man was standing right before them. Even with all this, they refused to change their attitude. And yet, despite this open defiance, Peter and John were not going to back down from their witness.

What relationship is there between knowing Christ and sharing Christ? Why is knowing Christ personally so essential to our being able to witness about Him?

Sharing Our Experience

In Acts 26, we find the apostle Paul standing as a prisoner before King Agrippa. Here, speaking directly to the king, Paul gave his own personal testimony. He talked about his life, not only as a persecutor of Jesus' followers but also, after his conversion, of his life as a witness to Jesus and about the promise of the resurrection of the dead (*Acts 26:8*).

When Paul was converted on the Damascus Road, our Lord spoke to him and said, "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you" (*Acts 26:16, NKJV*). Sharing our faith is always a dynamic experience. It is telling the story of what Christ has done for us in the past, what He is doing in our lives today, and what He will accomplish for us in the future.

Witnessing is never about us. It is always about Him. He is the God who forgives our iniquities, heals our diseases, crowns us with loving kindness, and satisfies us with good things (*Ps. 103:3–5*). Witnessing is simply sharing our story of His amazing grace. It is a testimony of our personal encounter with this God of amazing grace.

Read 1 John 1:1–3 and compare it with Galatians 2:20. What similarities do you see? How is John's experience similar to Paul's?

Although John and Paul had different life experiences, they both had a personal encounter with Jesus. Their experiences with Jesus were not ones that occurred at a particular point in the past and was then over. It was an ongoing, daily experience of rejoicing in His love and walking in the light of His truth.

Is conversion ever a thing of the past alone? Look at Ellen White's statement about those who thought their past conversion experience is all that matters: "As if, if they knew something about religion once, they did not need to be converted daily; but we ought every day, every one of us, to be converted."—*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 4, p. 46.

Regardless of whatever your past experiences have been, even if they were powerful and dramatic, why is it important to have a relationship with the Lord day by day, to sense His reality and His goodness and power day by day? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

The Power of a Personal Testimony

Let's look again at Paul before Agrippa. The apostle Paul stands before this man, the last in the line of Jewish kings, the Maccabees, and of the house of Herod. Agrippa professed to be a Jew, but at heart he was a Roman. (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 436.) The aged apostle, weary from his missionary journeys and battle-scarred in the conflict between good and evil, stands there, his heart filled with God's love and his face radiant with God's goodness. Whatever has happened in his life, whatever persecutions and difficulties he has experienced, he can declare that God is good.

Agrippa is cynical, skeptical, hardened, and really indifferent to any genuine value system. In contrast, Paul is filled with faith, committed to the truth, and stalwart in defense of righteousness. The contrast between the two men could not be much more evident. At his trial, Paul requests to speak and receives permission from Agrippa.

Read Acts 26:1–32. How does Paul witness to Agrippa? What can we learn from his words?

Kindness opens hearts where abrasiveness closes them. Paul is incredibly gracious to Agrippa here. He calls him an “expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews” (*Acts 26:3, NKJV*). He then launches into a discussion of his conversion.

Read Paul's conversion story in Acts 26:12–18 and then carefully notice its effect on Agrippa in Acts 26:26–28. Why do you think Agrippa reacted the way he did? What impressed him about Paul's testimony?

Paul's testimony of how Jesus changed his life had a powerful impact on a godless king. There is no witness as effective as a changed life. The witness of a life genuinely converted has an amazing influence on others. Even godless kings are moved by lives transformed by grace. Even if we don't have as dramatic a story as Paul, we all should be able to tell others about what it means to know Jesus and to be redeemed by His blood.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “ ‘Almost Thou Persuadest Me,’ ” pp. 433–438, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

The essence of the Christian life is a relationship with Jesus that is so rich and full that we long to share it. As important as correct doctrine is, it cannot substitute for a life transformed by grace and changed by love. Ellen G. White makes it plain when she states: “The Saviour knew that no argument, however logical, would melt hard hearts or break through the crust of worldliness and selfishness. He knew that His disciples must receive the heavenly endowment; that the gospel would be effective only as it was proclaimed by hearts made warm and lips made eloquent by a living knowledge of Him who is the way, the truth, and the life.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 31. In the book *The Desire of Ages*, she adds this powerful thought: “The wonderful love of Christ will melt and subdue hearts, when the mere reiteration of doctrines would accomplish nothing.”—Page 826.

There are those who have the idea that giving their personal testimony is about trying to convince others of the truths they have discovered in the Word of God. Although it is important at the appropriate time to share the truths of God’s Word, our personal testimony has much more to do with the freedom from guilt, the peace, the mercy, the forgiveness, and the strength, hope, and joy we have found in the gift of eternal life Jesus so freely offers.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why do you think our personal testimony is so powerful in influencing others? How have the testimonies of others impacted you and your own experience?
- 2 In class, talk about your answer to Wednesday’s final question. Why is a daily experience with the Lord so important, not just to our witness but to our own personal faith, as well?
- 3 Of course, a powerful testimony can be an effective witness. At the same time, why is a godly life such an important part of our witness?
- 4 Share your personal testimony with the class. Remember that you are sharing what Christ has done for you and what He means to you. What difference does Jesus make in your life?

Reviving an Ohio Church

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Financial planner Vince Waln credits the Holy Spirit and a pipe organ for transforming a declining church of 15 people into a vibrant congregation of about 85 in three years in the U.S. state of Ohio.

The miracles started when Vince preached at various small churches, including at the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist Church, where he had worshiped as a child. “Attendance had really fallen off,” Vince said. “There was no one to play the piano. My wife sang special music with a CD.”

One evening, his wife, Darla, returned from a bridal shower at the Hamilton church and announced that the church pastor was leaving.

“You could be their pastor,” she said, jokingly.

For the next two weeks, Vince couldn’t forget the church. He awoke at night with his wife’s words ringing in his ears, “You could be the pastor.”

Finally, Vince volunteered to assist the Hamilton church for six months. The next thing he knew, the Hamilton church’s six board members told him that they had been praying for him to be their lay pastor.

“Those prayers had gone on for the two weeks that I had been waking up in the middle of the night,” Vince said. “It was definitely the Holy Spirit working.”

In the new role, Vince invited a retired professional organist, Jerry Taylor, to assist as music director. One day, Jerry excitedly called Vince to say an upscale retirement community in Cincinnati was selling a pipe organ for \$75,000.

“We can’t afford that!” Vince said. “Even \$5,000 would be too much.”

“Let’s go look at it anyway,” Jerry said.

The retirement community’s chaplain was fascinated to hear about the Hamilton church. He excused himself for a moment and, returning, said, “I spoke with the director just now. We have been looking for a church to donate this pipe organ to. The only requirement is to open the doors to the community.”

The Hamilton church received the pipe organ for free.

The miracles continued. Construction workers remodeled the sanctuary for the pipe organ at cost. Engineers helped the church, whose cistern-drawn water was undrinkable, connect to the city water supply. Christians from many denominations joined the church’s new choir.



A thrilling moment came when two women walked into the church on a Sabbath morning and announced that they wanted to keep the biblical Sabbath after studying the Bible on their own. One woman and her husband were later baptized.

The pipe organ, however, appears to be the main instrument that God has used to attract people to church, said Vince Waln, 65. “We are just drawing in the people,” he said.

Key Text: *Mark 5:1–20*

Study Focus: *Mark 5:1–20, Mark 16:1–11, Acts 4:1–20, Acts 26:1–32.*

Part I: Overview

There is unusual power in personal testimony. When an individual accepts Christ and his or her life is dramatically changed, people notice. Not all conversions are sudden and instantaneous. Stories of drug addicts accepting Christ; alcoholics transformed by grace; self-centered, materialistic business leaders changed by God’s love; or rebellious teenagers converted are thrilling to listen to but are certainly not the only examples of conversion.

At times, and maybe even more commonly, the Holy Spirit works gently and gradually on human hearts. There are those who have been brought up in godly Christian homes who have a precious story to share. They may have never really rebelled against Christ but also were never fully committed to Him. They sense the moving of His Holy Spirit in their lives and commit themselves totally to God. Their testimony is just as powerful as the more dramatic, sensational conversion stories. None of us are born Christians. As Jeremiah candidly states, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (*Jer. 17:9, NKJV*). The apostle Paul adds in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

Because every single one of us has “sinned and fall[en] short of the glory of God” (*Rom. 3:23, NKJV*), we all need the grace of God. Conversion is not for a select few. It is for all of us, and because it is, we all have a story to tell. Your story is not my story, and my story is not your story, but each of us, redeemed by God’s grace and charmed by His love, has a personal testimony to share with the world.

Part II: Commentary

Here is your Bible trivia quiz for today. Whom did Jesus send out as His first missionary? Was it Peter or possibly James and John? Maybe Thomas, Philip, or one of the other disciples? The answer may surprise you. It was none of the names listed above.

The first missionary Christ commissioned was a man, formerly possessed by demons, now transformed by His grace. This unlikely witness

had a powerful impact on Decapolis, ten towns mainly to the east of the Sea of Galilee. The demoniac had been hopelessly possessed with demons for years. He terrorized the region and struck fear into the hearts of villagers living in the area. Yet, deep down in his heart, there was a longing for something better—a longing that the demons could not quench.

Despite the demonic forces that held this poor man in bondage, Mark 5 records that when the demoniac saw Jesus, “he ran and worshiped Him” (*Mark 5:6, NKJV*). Scripture says that this man was tormented and possessed by a “legion” of demons. A legion was “the largest single unit in the Roman army . . . at full strength [it] consisted of about 6,000 soldiers” (according to the *Archeological Study Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishers, 2005], p. 1633). In the New Testament, the term “legion” represents a vast or huge number. Jesus never lost a battle with demonic forces, no matter how many there were. Christ is our all-powerful, victorious Lord. Demons are no contest for His mighty power.

Jesus’ ministry is always a complete ministry. Once the demoniac was delivered, he was found “sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind” (*Mark 5:15*). Where did he get the clothes? It is likely the disciples shared their outer garments with him. He now sat attentively at the feet of Jesus, listening to His Words, eagerly absorbing spiritual truths. He was physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually whole. His one desire was to now follow Jesus. He longed to become one of Jesus’ disciples.

Mark’s Gospel records that the formerly demon-possessed man “begged” Jesus to allow him to enter the boat and journey with Him (*Mark 5:18, NKJV*). The word “begged” is a strong word. It indicates a passionate desire. It can be translated “beseeched,” “implored,” or “entreated.” It means to make an appeal with emotion. It means to ask with intensity.

Jesus’ response is as equally amazing as the demoniac’s conversion. Jesus knew that this converted, transformed demoniac could do more in that region than He and the disciples could then do. The prejudice was high in this Gentile region against Christ, but they would listen to one of their own, especially one with a reputation like the demoniac’s. Eventually, they would be prepared for Christ’s visit at a later date.

Therefore, Jesus said, “ ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you’ ” (*Mark 5:19, NKJV*). The man’s response was immediate. “And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled” (*Mark 5:20, NKJV*). The word “pro-

claim” is *kerusso* and can be translated “to herald” or “to publish.” In the brief time that the demoniac spent with Jesus, his life was so radically changed that he had a story to tell. We can only imagine the impact his testimony had on the thousands in the ten towns in the Gadara region. When Jesus returned some nine or ten months later, the minds of this largely Gentile population were wide open to receive Him. (See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 340, 341.)

There is an eternal truth that must not be overlooked in this story. Nor must this truth be overshadowed by the miraculous, sensational, and somewhat dramatic conversion of the demoniac, as important as that is. Christ desires to use all who come to Him. The demoniac did not have the advantage of spending time daily with Jesus as the disciples did. He did not have the opportunity of listening to His sermons or witnessing His other miracles, but he did have the one indispensable ingredient for witnessing—a changed life. He had a personal knowledge of the living Christ. He had a heart filled with love for his Master. This is the essence of New Testament witnessing. As Ellen G. White so aptly states, “Our confession of His faithfulness is Heaven’s chosen agency for revealing Christ to the world. We are to acknowledge His grace as made known through the holy men of old; but that which is most effectual is the testimony of our own experience. We are witnesses for God as we reveal in ourselves the working of a power that is divine.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 347. New Testament believers witnessed for Christ through the uniqueness of their own personalities. They each had different encounters with Christ, but each of these encounters led them to enthusiastically share the Christ they loved.

In Monday’s study, “Proclaiming the Risen Christ,” the two Marys are transformed at the tomb. The last time they had seen Jesus, His bloodied body was taken down from the cross. Think of their despair at that moment. The last few days were difficult beyond belief. Now with fearful hearts, anxious about the future, they approach the tomb, wondering how they will get past the Roman guards and who will roll away the stone for them to enter the tomb and embalm the body of Christ.

To their surprise the tomb is empty. Christ is alive. An angelic being announces, “He is risen, . . . go quickly and tell His disciples” (*Matt. 28:6, 7, NKJV*). The record states, “So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word” (*Matt. 28:8, NKJV*).

As they are running to tell the story, our resurrected Lord meets them and exclaims, “Rejoice! . . . Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me” (*Matt. 28:9, 10, NKJV*). Good news is for sharing. Hearts filled with His grace and charmed by His love cannot

be silent.

The repeated theme throughout the New Testament is one of witness. The acts of the apostles are acts of witness. The disciples witnessed of a Christ they knew, one whom they personally experienced. Is it possible to be a false witness? Let's suppose you were called to a court of law as a witness of some accident or crime. Let's also assume you were not present at the scene and made up a story to assist a friend. You could be imprisoned for lying to the court. The judge and jury require only witnesses with a personal experience of events. They want genuine witnesses, not imposters.

Only genuine, authentic Christianity can capture the attention of this generation. Unless we have had a personal, real experience with Jesus, our witness will fall on deaf ears. We cannot share a Christ we do not know.

New Testament believers shared a Christ they knew. Peter and John echo the reality of converted hearts when they proclaim, “ ‘For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’ ” (*Acts 4:20*). Before the Cross, Peter was a vacillating yet self-assured disciple. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ changed his life. Before the Cross, John was one of the “sons of thunder” (*Mark 3:17*). That's not a title that you give to a meek, mild, timid man. But after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, John's life was changed. Neither Peter nor John could be silent; they were transformed by grace and loved to tell the story.

Witness is not about us. It is not about how bad we were or even how good we are now after we've met Jesus. It is all about Jesus. It is about His love, His grace, His mercy, His pardon, and His eternal power to save us. The apostle Paul never tired of testifying of what Christ did for him, but he never focused exclusively on how bad he was. Instead, he focused on how good God is. Have your class review Acts 26:1–28. Notice how the apostle Paul divides his testimony into three parts: his life before knowing Christ, how he met Christ, and his life after meeting Christ.

Part III: Life Application

Suppose you had only a few minutes with a friend who desired to know Christ. How would you give a three-minute testimony to a friend struggling to believe? What clues does Paul's testimony in Acts 26 reveal? How does the outline of his testimony assist you in giving yours? What role did the Old Testament Scriptures play in Paul's testimony?

Write one sentence under each of the following headings:

A. What was your life like before you met Christ?

B. At what point in your life did you meet Christ?

C. What difference has Christ made in your life?

If you have been brought up in a Christian home, was there ever a point in your life when you consciously accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Describe a time when you sensed Him working powerfully in your life.

Notes
