

Come On
& Testify!



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[Jesus said], “Go back to your home, and tell all that God has done for you.”

And off [the man] went, proclaiming throughout the town how much Jesus had done for him.

Luke 8:39 CSB



Table of Contents

THE TESTIMONY OF...

Abraham, Father of Israel

Gomer, Wife of Hosea

Peter, Disciple of Jesus

Lydia, Friend of Paul

The Church, Bride of Christ



THE TESTIMONY OF

Abraham, Father of Israel

Of all the characters in the great narrative of Scripture, I would venture to guess that Abraham is one of the most well known. No matter your level of involvement in church growing up, the stories and songs of Father Abraham seem to permeate all circles. He is one of the few Bible characters that people seem to know whether they attend church regularly or not.

Have you ever stopped to ponder why that might be?

As I paused to do exactly that, I continued to land on one answer: people are always talking about Abraham because of the incredible story God wrote in and through his life.

Just think about it. In his lifetime (covered in Genesis 12-25), Abraham experienced things such as a call to leave his home and move to a foreign land, struggles of continual infertility with his wife (Sarah), the lack of an heir to receive his wealth after his death, a change in name and purpose, and so much more.

But of all the things written in Abraham's story, one thing stands as the marker for his life and purpose: that God chose him and his family from which to bring forth the nation of Israel. God could have chosen anyone, but He knowingly and purposefully selected Abraham to be the genealogical patriarch of His chosen people.

And it was out of this divine appointment that Abraham chose to live his life in faithful, continual pursuit of God.

Throughout his life, Abraham made a sincere effort to follow God's commands with faithful obedience. Although there were plenty of times his humanity bled through in these efforts (see Genesis 12, 16, and 20), Abraham still sought to pursue God and His covenant promise with him with everything he had.

One instance of Abraham putting everything on the line to faithfully pursue God is found in the famous narrative of Genesis 22 as Abraham is told to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

The chapter opens with God calling upon Abraham, to which Abraham immediately answers, "Here I am." God wastes no time in giving Abraham His command as He says,

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... and offer him [in Moriah] as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

GENESIS 22:2

Abraham could have protested, fought back, disagreed, or even adamantly refused. But instead, he chose to faithfully and fully obey God without question or opposition, trusting completely.

Abraham rose the next morning and set out with Isaac, ascended the mountain the Lord directed him to, and even restrained Isaac and set him upon altar. It was only as Abraham took the knife, prepared to sacrifice Isaac as the Lord had commanded, that an angel came to stop him and God provided a sacrificial ram instead.

In regards to popularity, this story stands second only to that of God's promise to Abraham about his future descendants. And there is good reason for that!

This story shows the fullness of Abraham's testimony all in one.

Despite being called on and by God, Abraham didn't have to obey. At any point, he could have refused. He could have stayed in Ur and never moved to Canaan. He could have refused the covenant symbol of circumcision. He could have refused to take Isaac up the mountain. At any given point, Abraham could have chosen not to believe in or follow God.

But he didn't.

Abraham chose to obey and remain faithful to God even when it got messy and even when it hurt. He continued to trust God's promises and pursue Him with complete abandon. And in response, God chose to bless him in abundance.

The testimony of Abraham, Father of Israel, is one that proclaims the beauty of one man's faithfulness to God, and the blessing that came as a result of such obedience. Abraham's story is an example of what it looks like to live a life that wholly trusts God to do as He has promised He will, unafraid to do what He asks of us because God is always faithful to provide.

Think On It!

Spend some time reading through Genesis 22:1-19. Take note of anything that sticks out to you.

If you had been in Abraham's place in Genesis 22, what would your reaction have been? Do you think you would have been able to obey God's command?

What might it look like for you to follow God faithfully in your current season? Pray to invite God into it.



THE TESTIMONY OF

Gomer, Wife of Hosea

The story of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer has been one of my favorite Bible stories since I first studied it about three years ago. I randomly chose to study the book of Hosea for a school project and found myself utterly amazed by every aspect of it.

The book was full of beautiful prose, gracious redemption, and a consistent emphasis on God's all-consuming, unending, ever-faithful love for His people.

But my favorite aspect of Hosea wasn't the gorgeous poetry and promise that fills chapters 4-14. Instead, I was captivated by the short narrative of chapters 1-3, and specifically with one character within these chapters: Gomer, Hosea's wife.

Gomer doesn't get much "screen time" in the book, but her story is woven within Hosea's as he writes his account. Because Gomer is more of a secondary character, we don't know much about her other than the following.

Gomer

Hosea's wife, a former prostitute. She had three children with Hosea (Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi). Was unfaithful to Hosea, returning to prostitution. Taken and sold in the slave market, but was bought back by Hosea. Assumed to be faithful to Hosea following her return to him.

To be completely candid, my first thought upon reading through Gomer's story was, "What a mess!" Yet almost immediately, the Holy Spirit encouraged me to look at her story as the Lord does: focusing on the grace and redemption that resulted in Gomer's story, not the sin and the brokenness that led her there.

Gomer's story conveys much more than the failure of human effort and the detrimental impact that sin has on our lives. Her testimony is powerful for how it shows the sincere love of God and the deep, life-changing impact it has on us when we let it.

Look at it this way. Gomer, a known prostitute, gets married to Hosea, a known prophet. This marriage allows her freedom from her previous lifestyle, and she has three children with Hosea. Yet for some reason, Gomer chooses to be unfaithful, returning to prostitution and ultimately finding herself stuck in the slave market. She was being sold for fifteen shekels of silver (about \$1,000 today), which was half the cost of a "common" slave.

There, sitting at the slave market and waiting to be bought at a price that insinuated worthlessness, Gomer's story seemed to be written: she was unredeemable.

But God had another plan for Gomer's testimony.

God directed Hosea to go to the market, buy back Gomer, and restore the broken marriage covenant with her. God wanted to write a new story over Gomer's life: she was fully redeemed.

[Hosea said,] "You are to live with me many days. You must not be promiscuous or belong to any man, and I will act the same way towards you."

Gomer didn't do anything to deserve Hosea's compassion, let alone his abundant grace in restoring her as his wife. But that's what made his love for her so rich! It was unconditional.

God's love for us is the exact same – limitless and unconditional.

Gomer's testimony is one that rings of redemption, healing, and unfathomable grace. Despite her sinful past and destructive, selfish decisions, Hosea's love for Gomer reached beyond the mistakes she had made and sought to do more than just right the wrongs. Hosea's love sought to fully restore what was broken.

Hosea and Gomer's relationship stands as an illustration of God's love for us. Hosea's love and mercy for Gomer rewrote the narrative of her life, bringing newfound hope and blessing.

God's love and mercy offers the same gift to us. He is willing and waiting to rewrite our stories, bringing us from sin and pain to goodness and rejoicing. We need only let Him step in to do so.

Think On It!

Spend some time reading through Hosea 1-3. Take note of anything that sticks out to you.

Have you ever felt like Gomer did at the slave market (unredeemable)? When and why?

Is there anything in your life you may want God to redeem?

Say a short prayer inviting Him into it, then ask if there is any action He wants you to take.



THE TESTIMONY OF

Peter, Disciple of Jesus

If you've been following along in the Converge devotionals for any of the past series, you'll notice that Peter is a recurring character in each of them. And there is good reason for that! In my opinion, Peter is one of the most relatable people in the Bible because his humanity is put on full display time and time again in the gospel narratives.

Peter got angry. He spoke and acted without thinking. He was impulsive and unpredictable. Peter was hot and cold, flipping between confidently devoted in following Jesus and hesitantly doing the same.

Of all the disciples, Peter seems to get the most critique (outside of Judas Iscariot), and that's because the gospel writers take frequent, detailed note of Peter's mistakes.

And praise God that they did!

Though it may seem like the gospel writers were "picking on" Peter for calling out his missteps and shortcomings, they likely did so to encourage hearers of the message that they don't have to be perfect to follow Jesus, nor do they have to have it all together for Jesus to use them!

Peter was quick-tempered and reckless, misunderstanding Jesus or his message on multiple occasions. But that didn't stop Jesus from using him in powerful and deeply impactful ways.

A famous example of Jesus using Peter in spite of his shortcomings is found in Matthew 16:13-20. As Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Caesarea Philippi, Jesus stops to ask his disciples a seemingly simple question:

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

The disciples offer a non-committal answer, pulling from the different titles others had assigned to Jesus: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets "reappearing." Jesus follows up with a more pointed inquiry:

"But you, who do you say that I am?"

True to his bold, impulsive character, Peter answers immediately and says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." You can almost hear the joy in Jesus' voice as he replies to Peter.

Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven."

MATT. 16:17-19

Not only does Jesus encourage Peter for his correct identification, he also designates exclusive kingdom authority to him for it!

Jesus gave Peter the “Keys to the Kingdom,” that is, the spiritual authority to bind and loose things on earth and in heaven. This is why Peter is often depicted holding two keys in modern artwork.

As Jesus did ministry with Peter, he helped develop him into a strong leader and teacher. Yet even in this process of discipleship from the Messiah himself, Peter had times where he stumbled or failed in what he was doing. But Jesus kept working, teaching, and leading Peter despite it all. And eventually, Peter became a highly influential figure in both the church of his time and today.

Peter’s testimony shows us how Jesus can (and very often does) use us despite our shortcomings. No matter how hard we try, our humanity will always come through and cause moments of sin and brokenness. But Jesus is completely gracious and patient, holding out a hand to help us to our feet when we slip up.

There is no flaw, insecurity, or sin that can keep God from doing His ministry in and through you. It’s all about our willingness to do what Peter did: to rightly identify Jesus and his power in our life.

Think On It!

Spend some time reading through Matthew 16:13-20.
Take note of anything that sticks out to you.

Is there anything in your life that makes you feel “disqualified” from being used by God?

Say a short prayer inviting God to lead and use you as He did Peter. If you had an answer to the above question, pray to invite God into that as well.



THE TESTIMONY OF

Lydia. Friend of Paul

Much like Gomer, Lydia is a secondary character in the book of Acts. She only appears once for a brief five verses in chapter 16, wherein the author (Luke) quickly details her conversion to Christianity upon hearing Paul's gospel presentation.

Because of the brevity of Lydia's appearance in Acts 16, our knowledge about her is pretty limited. Here's what we do know.

Lydia

A woman living in Philippi of Macedonia during Paul's travels there. She was "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira" (16:14) who came to listen to Paul's message. She converted to Christianity after hearing Paul teach, then hosted Paul and his companions. She was Paul's first convert in Europe.

But despite how little we may know about Lydia, the things we do know offer great value to her story and inclusion in Scripture. When it comes to our testimony, even the seemingly unimportant details can (and typically do) carry some of the greatest weight.

Let's consider the following small yet vital pieces of Lydia's story:

- 1. She was a woman**
- 2. She was a dealer of purple cloth**
- 3. She was Paul's first convert in Europe**

1. She was a woman

At first glance, we may not credit much importance to Lydia's gender, but the sociocultural context of Paul's day proves otherwise. When Paul was traveling on his second missionary journey in 49-51 AD, the cultural attitude towards women was relatively dismissive. Women had limited rights and importance, and were frequently viewed as property rather than people. Not only was Paul's willingness to engage with Lydia abnormal for his day, but the choice of Acts' author to include her story was radical!

2. She was a dealer of purple cloth

Like the aspect of gender, Lydia's profession in selling purple cloth seems like an odd detail for Acts' author to include. However, cultural context helps us know that purple cloth was considered a highly desired, luxury item in ancient Rome. Lydia's involvement in selling this insinuates her wealth and social status, framing her as an influential figure in the community/trade market. In a way, Lydia would have been considered a sort of celebrity in Philippi.

3. She was Paul's first convert in Europe

Paul's second missionary journey begins in Acts 15:36, to which he immediately heads to the area of modern day Europe. Only a short 16 verses later, Paul and his companions run into Lydia and a few other women observing the Sabbath down by the river. As Paul shared the message of Jesus with these women, Lydia is moved to belief, becoming Paul's first convert. She then sets a powerful example as she immediately witnesses to her own family!

The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to respond to what Paul was saying...[and] she and her household were baptized.

Despite having a very brief appearance in the narrative of Paul's missionary travels, Lydia's story offers incredible encouragement and sets a strong example for Christian living.

Lydia's testimony shows us that no matter how boring or unimportant our life story may seem, God can always use those "lackluster" details to impact others in big ways! Lydia's conversion as a socially elite European woman had far reaching impact as she spread the news of Jesus to her family and others around her. Although her own story likely felt unexciting to her, God used it as an influential account to bring others into relationship with Him.

Some biblical scholars even propose that Lydia may have been responsible for starting or building up the church of Thyatira mentioned in Revelation 2, seeing as Thyatira is mentioned to be Lydia's hometown. Others also credit Lydia with helping lead the church in Philippi while she lived there.

No matter how mundane, routine, or typical your testimony may be, God is still moving within the details. He will use every single piece of our story for His Kingdom and glory if we only let Him.

Think On It!

Spend some time reading through Acts 16:11-15.
Take note of anything that sticks out to you.

Is there a part of your testimony you may feel is "too boring" for God to use?

Say a short prayer inviting God to use every piece of your story to bring people to Him, just as He did with Lydia.
If you had an answer to the above question, ask Him to use that specifically!



THE TESTIMONY OF

The Church, Bride of Christ

When we take the time to fully explore the lives and stories of the people of the Bible, we can easily find ourselves slipping into idolizing them. This process of idolization isn't something we do with the intent of worshipping them, but rather something that happens subconsciously as we elevate them in importance.

This same kind of process can happen when we read through the mistakes made by people in Scripture. Except rather than giving them extra undeserved credit, we may find ourselves shaking our heads at their failures, sitting in disbelief that they messed up.

Both of these processes, the raising up and the tearing down, can be ultimately harmful to our faith walk as we seek to learn more about the Bible and the people about which it was written. Rather than drawing us closer to them, focusing on the successes or shortcomings of biblical characters may cause us to distance ourselves from them.

We might find ourselves saying things like, "I would never make that mistake," or "God would never use me like that."

While seemingly harmless, the reality is that comments and thoughts like these lead to a divide in our minds. We start to separate the church of the Bible from the church of today, splitting the story of God's people in half.

But this was never God's intention.

Time and time again in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, the biblical characters and authors alike all stress the importance of being a unified people in pursuing God.

Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.

1 COR. 1:10

The issue of separating ourselves from others either to view ourselves as greater or lesser than them is not new. Nearly all of the letters in the New Testament address this problem of division and emphasize the unity of the church in her mission...

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you...

MATT. 28:19-20

As well as her identity...

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,

EPH. 5:25-26

The church is so much more than a building and so much further-reaching than the bounds of Scripture. The mission of the church to spread the news of Jesus and make disciples of all the nations didn't stop when the author of Revelation finished his letter. The identity of the church hasn't changed as the Christian faith has split into varying denominations over the years.

The testimony of the church has always been and always will be this: that we are called to proclaim the good news to all who will hear, and that Christ is coming back to receive all who believe and bring us into eternal life with the Father.

The story of the church is still being written as we are still seeking to tell others about Jesus and invite them into his healing and freeing presence. As the church, we are the hands and feet of Jesus here on earth, demonstrating his love and grace to anyone who is within our reach.

And here's the beautiful part of the church's testimony:
we are all invited to a part of it.

So, how will you help write the church's story?

Think On It!

Spend some time reading through Matt. 28:19-20 and Eph. 5:25-26.
Take note of anything that sticks out to you.

Have you ever thought about the story of the church as still being written? Why or why not?

Say a short prayer inviting God to use you as He continues to write the church's testimony. Ask Him to identify a specific way in which He may want to use you.



**Come and listen, all who
fear God, and I will tell
what he has done for me.**

Psalm 66:16 CSB



Reach out!

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northwoods

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Hope lives here.