

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word Testimony in a couple of ways.

Testimony:

1a: a solemn declaration usually made orally by a witness under oath in response to interrogation by a lawyer or authorized public official

b: firsthand authentication of a fact : EVIDENCE

c: an outward sign

2a: an open acknowledgment

b: a public profession of religious experience

It used to be that the one thing people couldn't argue with was your own testimony. When it came to evangelism people could argue the validity of the scripture or if Jesus was really the Son of God, but we'd say they can't argue with the evidence of a changed life. But, in a time when everything can be argued about, when everything is labeled fake, phony, conspiracy, and when respect for someone holding an opposing opinion or view has been mostly lost I wonder what does it mean to have a testimony of faith that is believable? What does it mean that my actions and words stand as an outward sign of what Jesus is doing on the inside? What does it mean for someone to have firsthand knowledge or evidence of me publicly professing an encounter with Jesus? Is it possible in this day and time for others to see Jesus at work in me or you and acknowledge that there is something different about us as a result? Something different but something they would want for themselves too? What is the impact of our testimony of faith on those around us?

People are still looking for something real and true and worth living for even in this crazy time we're living in. The question is do they see what they're looking for in you and me? In other words, do our lives testify of Jesus? So, this morning I want to talk about testimonies at midnight and look at a timeless story found in Acts 16. I pray that we're all challenged to think of the power of our own testimony to impact the world around us with the good news of Jesus.

In Acts 16 we find Paul, who is an apostle and follower of Jesus, on a journey telling others about how Jesus radically changed his life. He is traveling through Turkey with Timothy, his young protégé, Luke, the good doctor who wrote the account we're going to read, and his friend, Silas. One night he has a vision and sees a man in

the region of Macedonia who says to him – come over to Macedonia and help us. Now today if you look at a map there is a country called Macedonia located just above Greece, but in Paul's day northern Greece was referred to as Macedonia and if you think that 2,000 years later that piece of information matters not to the current residents of northern Greece you would be wrong. That is a touchy subject. Anyhow, Paul takes from this vision that God is calling them to preach the gospel in this area so they set sail and come into the port of Philippi. **(Picture of Port City)**

Paul's custom when arriving in a new city is to find the local synagogue, if there is one, and to begin teaching about Jesus. We get the impression that there is no synagogue in Philippi and as a result we guess that to mean there were not 10 God fearing men in the city since that was a pre-requisite to having a Jewish synagogue. What they find on the Sabbath is a group of God fearing women who met together each week outside of the city by the river. **(picture Lydia)** One of these women was named Lydia. The Bible says God opened her heart to respond to Paul's message and she becomes the first convert in Europe and later leads the church there. I love how God has always called women to serve Him and used them to build His church.

Some time later Paul and Silas were walking through the streets of Philippi **(picture Marketplace)** and a young slave girl began following them and shouting, "Hey, everyone, these people are from God and they can tell you how to be saved!" Now this may seem like a really great, free publicity stunt or an excellent way to draw a crowd, but the problem is this girl was actually a fortune-teller who had an evil spirit. Paul just let it go for a few days and then when he could take it no more he turned around to the girl who just kept following them and shouting in the marketplace and he commands the spirit to leave her in the name of Jesus. Super cool moment, definitely making the highlight reel for his next crusade rally, but her owners are now livid because their income is drastically impacted without the girls fortune telling abilities. This is where things go south for Paul and Silas.

They're dragged before the city officials and charges are brought – now not the real charges. I mean they didn't say um these guys cast out an evil spirit from a girl we were using and enslaving to make a profit. Rather they said um these Jews are

asking us Romans to follow their customs. The crowd joins in and starts attacking them and that's where we pick up the story in verse 22.

“The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don't harm yourself! We are all here!”

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.” Acts 16:22-36

(Picture Jail) This last picture is what archaeologists believe to be the jail in Philippi and therefore most likely where Paul and Silas were on this night.

The first convert at Philippi was the pastor's dream – they shared God's word, God opened the heart of the hearer, and Lydia gets saved. The second has the high drama, big, miraculous story – delivered from evil spirits in a public place. It's the

testimony every good AG kid grew up thinking if they didn't have then were they really saved? The sort of testimony that featured in all the human videos of the 1990's. Lydia's testimony was an open acknowledgment that Jesus was God's Son, the girl's testimony was an outward sign and a public profession of a religious experience. But, most people live in the middle and come to faith not from the preacher or the evangelistic demonstration in the marketplace. Most people will witness the firsthand authentication of a changed life, a life that remains steady in the storms, a life lived for Jesus no matter what. Your life is a testimony to those around you whether you realize it or not. You are the one providing evidence to those around you of what it means to serve Jesus and what it looks like to trust Him on the bad days as well as the good. Lydia was already seeking, the girl was a one in a million story, but the jailer was just a regular guy doing his job to provide for his family not even noticing that there was a need for a Savior in his life and paying no attention to the ways in which he was bound in his own sin. The jailer wasn't at the river, he wasn't in the marketplace earlier that day. He was at work when he came to faith. We don't know if he was seeking to know God that night, perhaps he was in no way spiritual at all, but he saw firsthand what God did and how Paul and Silas responded to their situation. The people around you on your job or in your school or on your street may not know that they need Jesus, they may not ever seek out a church or follow a preacher, but someone is watching your life and they will be affected and brought to faith by the testimony they see up close. And, sometimes it's our testimony in the dark of midnight that is most impactful.

As we dive into this account of Paul and Silas and the jailer I want us to see 4 things about our testimony in the midnight hours.

1. Our testimony in the midnight hours speaks volumes and draws unexpected listeners.

Paul and Silas have been stripped, beaten and flogged and now are stuck in stocks. They are in pain and uncomfortable to say the very least and yet at midnight we find them praying and singing to the Lord. The circumstances they found themselves in were beyond their control but they could still control how they responded. Years later from another jail cell Paul would write the letters we know as Ephesians and

Colossians and in both books he tells God's people to **"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything." Ephesians 5:19-20** and **"Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."**

Colossians 3:15-16 Paul knew what he was talking about and perhaps was remembering this experience as he wrote. Regardless of circumstances let a song of praise remain in your heart. Let God's word resonate within you. Encourage one another and be grateful. Paul and Silas had little to be grateful for, but while they still had breath they chose to encourage others and sing to the Lord and the other prisoners were listening to them and the jailer was hearing their testimony too. It was an unlikely place for them to testify of the goodness of God, but hadn't God sent them to Macedonia to preach the gospel? It was the biggest crowd they'd had, with an audience that wasn't going anywhere. These unexpected listeners were getting a firsthand authentication of what it looked like to trust Jesus in the worst of times. What about us? 2020 has beaten us up and left us stripped bare and our emotions are raw. We're tired. I'm not even a parent and I feel like if I have to make one more decision this year I might collapse. Have you seen that meme on social media that says 2020 is an indicator that no one answered the question where do you see yourself in 5 years correctly in 2015? No one saw this coming. But, here we are. We're all a little worried and weary and unsure and it definitely feels like it's midnight. This is the time of day when our filter is gone and what's inside of us is bound to come out. May our testimony in the midnight of 2020 be that what's inside of us is prayer. That at midnight we were found praying. Praying for one another, praying for teachers, doctors and nurses, law enforcement, our friends who are grieving recent newsworthy events and wondering if their lives matter, praying for our leaders, for our nation, for those around us – because others are listening. What are they hearing from us in the midnight hours? May our testimony be that what comes out of us in the midnight hours of 2020 is a song of praise. The evidence all around the jailer was something was different about the way these 2 men

responded to their circumstances and he along with every prisoner in the place were taking note.

2. Our testimony to others in the chaos of midnight and in the aftermath is “We’re all still here!”

As Paul and Silas began lifting their voices to the Lord there was a sudden earthquake, the prison doors flew open and chains came loose. This was freedom to the captives in the most literal sense, yet it was also a little chaotic. In the chaos Paul and Silas had risen as leaders causing the other prisoners to look to them because they some how convinced everyone to stay put. The jailer panics thinking everyone is gone and that he’ll be accused for what’s happened. Once in Jerusalem when Peter was in prison and God delivered him the jailers who were working that night were executed so it’s possible a similar rule was in effect in Philippi. But, Paul yells to the jailer – don’t harm yourself, don’t lose hope, because after the beatings, after the pain, after the hurt, after the earthquake, after the shaking loose of everything around us we’re still here.

This is the testimony of God’s people. Take your best shot. Life do your worst. But, at the end of the day, the end of 2020, the end of a pandemic, we’re still here. The sickness, the heartache, the loss, the trials, the smear campaign against us, the difficulty that tried to take us out didn’t work because we’re still here and we’re still praying and praising in the midnight hour. It’s the testimony of the church that for all of history we continue to rise from the chaos and proclaim to a world that is hurting and bent on harming itself we shout – We’re still here! As I read those words this week my heart started pounding inside my chest. It resonated so deeply inside of me and it’s the reason I’m preaching from this passage and not another. This is the testimony we’re called to announce to others around us – life may have beaten us down, it might have tried to break us. 2020 may have paralyzed us or wounded us in the worst way, but we’re still here. We may not look like much when it’s over, we might be barely hanging on, but in the midnight hour we can still declare, I’m still here! The church has sometimes had to go underground, or online or out of sight, but we’re still here. Because God’s church cannot be stopped. The building can close, but the church doesn’t stop. Programs change, but the mission of the church

remains the same. Because hurting people still exist, the lost are still in need of a Savior, the hungry still need fed, kids still need a safe place, the grieving still need a church family, teenagers still need encouragement and so the church is still here. We're still praying at midnight. We're still lifting our voice in praise even when it costs us something. We're still testifying that Jesus is the only way even when it's the unpopular opinion. We're still sharing Jesus. We're still grateful to the Lord in every situation. We're still the church – in this building or online. We're still reaching people with the good news even while the earth is shaking. We're still loving our community. We're still loving one another, and loving our neighbor, and loving our enemies. Carbondale is still a place of healing, hope, laughter, and peace to all the people. We're still here! Our testimony in the midnight of 2020 is that we're still here – you and me and this church and the church worldwide. We're still here making sure no harm comes to others – still caring for others. This is what Paul shouted and it's the testimony we shout too – to all who would hear – the church is still here! The people of God are still here! Come at us devil cause we're not going anywhere.

3. Our testimony in the midnight hours always points others to Jesus.

Instantly the jailer comes to Paul and Silas and falls before them asking what must he do to be saved. He doesn't ask what happened, doesn't ask who they are, doesn't ask for their thoughts on who might have caused the earthquake or get a list of conspiracy ideas on it, he didn't ask them to share 16 articles on the causes of earthquakes in jails from various sources, he didn't turn on the news or turn on them. Their testimony had been about Jesus and the jailer understood the evidence, he'd witnessed an outward sign, he'd heard a public profession of their experience with Jesus and he wanted that and that alone for himself and his whole family.

Folks, our testimony in the midnight of 2020 is drawing unexpected listeners and we as the church of Jesus can declare that we're still here but it only does those listeners any good if they hear us proclaiming that Jesus is the reason why. The world has enough information on every topic under the sun, but what they need to hear the people of God testify about is the Savior, the Healer, the Sustainer, the Prince of Peace, the Wisdom Giver, and the Mighty One whose name is Jesus! Our

testimony always points people to Jesus, the Eternal One, not to something temporary. The mission of the church is to proclaim the good news of Jesus so let's make sure we are.

The jailer asked what must I do. Paul tells him just believe. Because Jesus has already done all that needed to be done. Jesus did the work once and for all by dying as a ransom to free us from sin. He became the sacrifice that was required for my sin. In the Old Testament when someone sinned they would need to bring the correct sacrifice to the priest to offer on their behalf. But, the writer of Hebrews tells us, **“Those sacrifices were an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.” Hebrews 10:3-4** Instead, Jesus became that sacrifice for us and now **“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Hebrews 10:10** There was nothing the jailer needed to bring but himself in surrender, there was nothing else he needed to do other than believe in the Lord Jesus and be saved. The “doing” had been done by Jesus the “believing” was up to him. Our testimony should always promote Jesus, lift up Jesus, and let others know how they too can be saved.

4. Our testimony at any hour should bring joy to others and peace to us.

The jailer was filled with joy as he and his whole household heard the good news of Jesus. It wasn't about what they needed to do or earn, but it was about grace. They heard and believed and were baptized that very night. Joy filled him when the testimony of Paul and Silas became his testimony too – I once was lost but now am found. He then washed the wounds he and others had inflicted on Paul and Silas. Forgiveness was found in that act too. Jesus's wounds healed and saved the jailer, but the jailer needed to right the wrongs he had inflicted on these men and he did so as he washed their wounds. That's what people who have been changed by the love of Jesus do – they change their ways and extend that same love they've found to others. The next morning the jailer tells them go in peace. Peace comes to them because they had done what God had sent them to do – they'd preached the gospel in Philippi.

When others witness our lives firsthand what they should hear is us pointing to Jesus in all things and that should produce joy in their hearts. There's something

different about them – I always leave a conversation with her with a smile on my face. When I talk to him I'm always happier than I was before. It's weird because they're working the same frustrating job as I am but they seem so joyful about it. I don't understand how they can be so full of joy while making the same hard decision as I am. Her life doesn't seem easy, but she seems so grateful. I want to be more like that guy because even in the hospital he's just as kind as ever and full of joy. These are the impacts your testimony might be having on others. Because when you're full of Jesus it tends to bring joy to those who come in contact with you.

But, it doesn't make sense to sing while in pain. It doesn't make sense to pray when beaten down. It doesn't make sense to think of others at midnight in a jail cell. I know, but as followers of Jesus we live differently. We're called to live in response to what Jesus has done. He's saved us, forgiven us, loved us. We live in response to that, which means circumstances don't dictate how we live. Jesus does. In the jail or in the marketplace. At midnight or in the morning. On a Tuesday or on the Sabbath. At the river or at our job our testimony is drawing unexpected listeners, our lives testify to others to not lose hope and do harm but instead we shout we're still here, and we point people to Jesus so they can experience the same thing, because Jesus brings joy and peace that can't be fully explained but can be fully experienced. Jesus loves you and wants to use your testimony to draw others to Him too. Will you commit yourself again today to letting your life be a testimony to those around you? Let your testimony in the midnight hours of 2020 stand as evidence, a firsthand authentication of the facts, an outward sign, an acknowledgment, and a public profession of what Jesus has done in your life and can do for others.

Let's pray.