

Witnesses with Power

Acts 1:6-11

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Jesus is very clear in his final instructions to his disciples before he ascends into heaven. When you are giving final instructions, it is important to be very clear. When you are Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son, the Savior of the world, and you are giving final instructions to your disciples who will carry your ministry on in the world, it is extremely important to be crystal clear with your final instructions. Could Jesus be any clearer to his disciples with his final instructions. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses. You will receive power and you will be my witnesses. And yet even with instructions that are crystal clear, I have had a little trouble trying to figure out the best way to title this sermon. My initial thought was this title: "Powerful witnesses." But then I changed my mind and came up with the present title: "Witnesses with power."

Why the change in the title? It just seems to me that "Powerful witnesses" puts the focus on the witnesses, whereas "Witnesses with power" puts the focus on the power. If the focus is on the witnesses then it might be very tempting to lift up the witnesses and develop little followings devoted to the witnesses, like what was happening in Corinth, where people started to say "I'm with Peter", or "I'm with Paul", or a "I'm with Apollos." (I Corinthians 1:12) On the other hand, if the focus is on the power, then it becomes obvious that those who carry that power within them are really nothing more than clay jars, fragile and weak, easily broken, but clay jars that carry within themselves a treasure of unsurpassable value.

If the focus is on powerful witnesses every preacher has to be Peter and every Sunday has to be Pentecost. Big sermons with big results. If, on the other hand, we focus on witnesses with power, all of the sudden the more quiet folk like Barnabas get to jump in with their own brand of witnessing, doing things like being a great big Son of Encouragement to people. A woman who spends all her time doing good and helping others, doing the very things Jesus said to do like clothing the naked, a woman like that, a woman named Dorcas becomes a shining example of a witness with power. A fellow named Ananias proves to be a witness with power as he helps a recent convert navigate his way as a new convert, jumping right in to help Saul become Paul. Paul becomes one of the most well-known witnesses in the whole New Testament thanks to a witness with power named Ananias. Lydia simply opened her home to some traveling missionaries, and yet there is no doubt her witness was powerful.

There was a guy I knew in our church in Houston named Jack. I don't think many people thought of Jack as a powerful witness. He was active. He was involved. But he didn't rush to the pulpit or step forward to lead bible studies. What Jack really loved and what Jack was really dedicated to was planting trees. That was nice for our church and nice for our community. Jack planted many trees at our church, and he planted even more in the neighborhood park that was adjacent to our church. Although most people would not consider Jack a powerful witness, the Apostle Paul himself made the analogy about different witnesses, saying that some plant and some water, but it is God who causes the growth. Jack planted and Jack watered those trees, and over the years there was quite a bit of growth.

Jack was a witness with power in my life. Periodically Jack would drop by my office and tell me he had a book for me. The books he suggested were always interesting. Two of the books contained stories of faith that stopped me in my tracks. Here on this Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, when we are remembering members of the military who gave so much, I think back to the book Jack gave me that was written by Ernest Gordon, recounting his years as a prisoner in WWII, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*. There is a story in that book of one prisoner who gives his life for another prisoner. As word of that one sacrifice spreads through the camp hopeless prisoners begin to remember Jesus saying, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." The loving example of one prisoner laying down his life for a fellow prisoner led to the outbreak of a full-blown revival among those prisoners of war. Prisoners of war can be witnesses with power. So, can a guy named Jack who planted and watered trees.

Jack also gave me copy of *Unbroken*, the bestselling book, and later a movie, about the life of Louie Zamperini. Louie was a World War II hero. When his plane was shot down in the Pacific Louie was captured and held as a POW. He was treated with great cruelty. He was beaten and tortured and nearly starved to death. Somehow, he survived. Somehow, he was released. Somehow, he made it home. Somehow, he fell in love. Somehow, he got married. The story of Louie's life matches the title of the book. After all that suffering, he was unbroken...sort of.

In reality Louie was deeply broken by the war. The book simply says, "Louie was wrecked." When he came home from the war he drank until he would pass out at night. "Rage, wild, random, and impossible to quell, began to consume him...His mind began to derail." The sound of a car backfiring would send him to the floor in the bar, cringing in fear as people stared at him. At his lowest point it was said that no one could reach Louie, because he had never really come home. In prison camp he had been dehumanized and his dignity taken away.

As Louie drank and drank, he became so cruel his wife decided to divorce him. Before they made their final split, a neighbor told them about a crusade being held in Los Angeles. Louie would not listen. His discouragement and the effects of his cruel bondage as a prisoner of war kept him from listening. When Louie was told there was a crusade, he had no interest. But his wife Cynthia listened. His wife Cynthia had interest. His wife Cynthia went to the crusade. She came home and told Louie she was not going to divorce him. She had experienced a religious awakening. His wife said she was not going to divorce him, but he had to come with her to the crusade. Night after night Louie refused.

The preacher kept preaching. This was back in the fall of 1949. Preaching at those crusades was a 31-year-old evangelist named Billy Graham. Finally, Louie agreed to go listen for one night. At the end of his message Billy asked for every head to bow and every eye to close. Billy Graham gave an invitation to follow Jesus Christ. Billy Graham wanted to know if anyone wanted to give their life to Christ. Billy invited those who wanted to give their life to Christ to come to the front. Well, here is what Louie decided to do. Louie decided to get up and walk out. Louie did not want to give his life to Christ. Instead of coming down to the front Louie went home. But something was happening. Something was happening in Louie's heart.

Louie grudgingly agreed to go the next night. Billy preached. At the end of the sermon Billy said, "Every head bowed and every eye closed." Billy wanted to know if anyone wanted to give their life to Christ. Louie, fighting God every step of the way, remembered at that moment being on a raft in the Pacific. He had been shot down. At that point, his death seemed certain. In his desperation he had prayed to God on that raft. "If you will save me, I will serve you forever." Now, years later, at a crusade, with every head bowed and every eye closed, God cut through the hardness of a man's broken heart and the deep pain of concentration camps and gave one lost soldier a vision. God opened Louie's eyes. God helped Louie remember the promise he had made. God had saved his life on that raft in the Pacific. While every head was bowed and every eye closed, Louie Zamperini got up that night and made his way to the altar. He woke up the next morning and he felt cleansed. "He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man he had been. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation, and his helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation. Softly, he wept."¹ Friends, I guess you could say Billy Graham was a powerful witness. But more importantly, Billy Graham was a witness to the power of Jesus Christ. It was the power of Jesus Christ that saved Louie Zamperini, and it was the power of Jesus Christ that led Louie to be one who then used his life to witness with power, by telling others he had been broken, and in Christ Jesus he had been made whole.

¹ Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, 351-376.

These amazing stories of salvation and transformation in the lives of prisoners of war on the River Kwai and Louie Zamperini at a stadium in Los Angeles were brought to me courtesy of a guy named Jack. It turned out Jack was like so many others. He was just a clay jar. He was just an ordinary guy who planted and watered trees. And yet in his own way Jack was a witness with power. And so are you. Or at least you can be. Any one of us can be a witness with power. In fact, every one of us can be a witness with power.

In the Spring of 1995, we celebrated our first Easter in Houston. That was the year I met Jack. Our youth wanted to do an outdoor Sunrise Service. We had this big, beautiful park next door. The youth decided to have their Sunrise Service in the park. I went over with the youth leader and we scouted out a good spot. Early on Easter morning we carried over chairs and set them up. People arrived. The youth got up and led a very meaningful service, including the traditional call and response, "He is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" The service was a witness to the power of the risen Christ.

At one point I noticed our youth leader had this look of wonder on her face. She nodded her head over to where the kids were leading the service. They were standing in front of some trees that seemed to have been planted for just that very moment. There were three trees. The tree in the middle was the most majestic tree you could imagine. It emanated life and vitality and hope and strength. Three trees. The one in the middle was majestic. Just like a day 2,000 years ago, when there were three trees, and the tree in the middle was holding up the body of God's Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. On that Easter morning in 1995, at a Sunrise Service, in the middle of a neighborhood park in Houston, Texas, those three trees had a story to tell. The tree in the middle was big and bold and beautiful. And it was empty. The big tree in the middle was empty. Jesus suffered and died on Calvary's Tree. But Jesus is no longer on that tree. Jesus is no longer on the cross. And Jesus is no longer in the tomb. Maybe in God's sovereign wisdom those three trees in a neighborhood park were planted for that very moment, that Easter Sunrise Service in 1995. And I bet I know the very man who planted those trees. Whether Jack ever knew it or not, his witness was powerful because his witness was to the one who has all the power.

Every Sunday is not Pentecost. Every preacher is not Peter. Much of life is ordinary. Much of being a witness is ordinary. Do some planting. Do some watering. Do some weeding. Do some fertilizing. Do some spreading. Be a good neighbor. Help the ones who are hurting. Share. Pray. Listen. Love. Love. Love. Always love. Take your place among all those other clay jars like Barnabas and Dorcas, Lydia and Ananias, and yes, the Peters and the Pauls. take your place among the clay jars. When you do these things, you are not working alone. When you do these things, you are not witnessing in your own power. When you do these things, you are witnessing with the power that comes from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who was sent by our risen Lord Jesus Christ. To him be all glory, honor, power, and praise. Amen.