

**Stories**  
**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**  
**August 17, 2008**  
**FBC Waynesboro**

What is your story? Every born again blood-bought believer has a story. It is called your testimony or your witness for Jesus. A believer without a story is a non-believer. In fact, I am convinced that the reason so many who profess to know Jesus do not tell others about Him is because we really have nothing to tell. We do not have a story. There is no testimony. Now it is so important to understand that although every born again blood-bought believer has a story to tell, it not the telling of our story that saves people. It is God who saves. And our God saves by His grace through the declaration of the Gospel. Nobody is saved who does not hear the Gospel and heed the Gospel. Every person who belongs to God through Jesus has heard the good news that we were born into sin and were separated from God being rightfully under His condemnation facing His eternal judgment but God who is rich in mercy sent to the world His One and Only Son who offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins and took our place in receiving the judgment for sin that we deserve so that when we surrender our lives to Jesus coming to Him in repentance and faith, we are saved by the grace of God. We become children of God and brothers and sisters with Jesus and with all others who belong to Him in the great family of God. And that experience of turning our lives toward God in repentance and faith and seeing God begin to change our lives so that we live for Him becomes the centerpiece of our story; the heart of our testimony. So, what is your story? Could you stand right where you are and give us your testimony today?

A testimony consists of three movements. The first movement of a testimony is your life prior to conversion. All that matters at this point is your making the point that prior to your conversion you were a sinner who was separated from God. You were living as do all sinners to gratify your own desires. You were doing what pleased you. This part of your testimony should be very brief and almost bereft of details of life prior to conversion less you give the enemy more credit than he deserves and call more attention to that past life than you should. There are professing Christians who spend far more time talking about what they used to be than they do talking about what God is doing in their life here and now. That is usually because there is in their hearts either some

secret longing for that previous life or actually living it out in private combined with a serious lack of evidence of God's work in the here and now which is the central and most significant part of our testimony. A testimony begins with a very brief statement about our being born sinners separated from God and then it turns to our experience of the grace of God, how we came to hear the call of the Gospel and say "yes" to Jesus. Then our testimony moves toward the most significant segment which is our telling what God by His Holy Spirit and through His Holy Word is doing in our lives right now and right here. A professing Christian who cannot say how God is shaping and shaking our lives right now is just that: a professing Christian. Every born again blood bought believer has a story and the most significant part of your story that you ought to delight in telling is what God is doing in your life right here and right now. And that must not be about material, monetary and physical things primarily but about how God is changing you and taking you deeper in devotion and further in faithfulness.

We see the significance of the work of God in the present right here in the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians. Look at verses 2-3. The phrases here are all in the present tense. And we will look very closely and carefully at each one of them next week but what I want you to see is that Paul begins his prayer of thanksgiving with what God is doing in their lives in the here and now and he ends it in verses 9-10 with what God did in them when He saved them by His grace. He moves from present expressions of grace to the past experience of grace. Now I must be clear here: a testimony that can tell of a past experience of grace without present evidences of grace represents a false witness and a witness of the present expressions of grace that is reduce to material, monetary, and physical blessings is equally a false witness. The first is built upon a false foundation and the second consists of what must never be considered the primary evidences of the presence or power of God at work in our lives. So, what is your story?

This first letter ever written to a church in the New Testament begins with three stories. Oh, I know it looks like three names but along with each name is a story and although the essence of each story is the same, the story lines are different. Here are three men each of whom was a sinner separated from God from birth who by the marvelous grace of God was brought into a right relationship with God and became His servants. That is the same for all three. But how that happened in each situation is very different, as it is for all people.

This struck me as I began to read and reflect upon these two letters. Do you know that in every other letter of Paul he is identified in some definitive and descriptive way. He calls himself a slave of Jesus and an apostle of Christ in Romans. He refers to himself and Silas as apostles and called men of God in 1 and 2 Corinthians and in Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians Colossians and 1 and 2 Timothy he refers to himself as an apostle but here and in 2 Thessalonians he simply states his name along with Silas and Timothy. Now at one level this is to signify the sender of the letter but at a much more important level is to cause those who receive the letter to remember who these men are. Those in Thessalonica know their stories. Let's you and I remember and reflect on them for a few moments.

Paul's story is one of drama and radical change. We find it first in the Book of Acts in chapter nine and then later in the book as he rehearses it before the king. And we find it again in Galatians. And each time it is essentially the same. Paul or Saul as he was known then was a rigorous rabbi and pious Pharisee. He saw this new sect of Jesus followers for what it was and he knew that it had to be eradicated. He took upon himself most likely as a call from God to be God's soldier to eliminate the enemy and that is why he was on his way to Syria to find any who were there. Something happened on that road that day that can only be explained as God. Saul heard God call his name and he knew it was God, "who are you, Lord." He did not exactly know who it was but whoever it was was Lord. This was no angelic vision. This was no love feast calling for an attitude adjustment. This was no course correction calling him to be a good Jew by loving these people rather than killing them. This was God. And this God had come to change his life and it happened mysteriously, instantly and dramatically. Saul was struck down. His eyes were fastened shut. His pride was obliterated as he had to be escorted into town and his heart was invaded by the life-changing grace of God. The persecutor of God's people had become one of God's people.

Is that your story? Dramatic change that happened in an instant. You were going along the course of your life and in a way that you still cannot explain, God showed up and radically changed your life. And that change is still going on which is the real evidence and the only real evidence that it was real change. God made you different by His grace and is making you different for His glory. It is one story but it is only one and it is the one that we in our culture have elevated to the top as typical. It is not in Scripture and it is not in the history of the church. It makes

the marquee and makes for meaningful moments in services of worship but it just one of several stories and it is not the one that is the best. This kind of radical change is usually reserved for the proud and the pompous, the stubborn of heart and the strong of will. It is the way of God in working with those who are so full of themselves that God has to force them to the ground, those whose eyes are so concentrated on self that He has to blind them to make them see. And often those who are saved in dramatic ways like this show in their testimonies how pride and self is still an issue as these are more often the kind that spend more time talking about how they used to be than they do giving glory to God about how He is changing them here and now.

But there is a second name here. You will not find the story of Silas's conversion in the New Testament. He shows up in the Jerusalem church when the big meeting was held about how Jewish believers and Gentile believers were to relate in the same body. He is one of those who is sent with the document that represented the decision of the elders about how Gentile believers and Jewish believers were to relate to each other in the church. We see him also alongside Paul after Paul and John Mark had their rift and Barnabas took John Mark and Silas joined Paul where his name is always subservient to Paul. And we see him as the secretary for Peter in the writing of his letters and I would like to think that it was Silas who brought Peter and Paul together both of whom finally found John Mark to be of some value. Silas was a man who was true to the truth and trustworthy with that truth. He was quiet but he did not quit. He was a soldier who did not need to be a General. We know the way in which he lived as we read the page of his story upon the New Testament but we do not have the opening chapter that tells us how that story began.

I believe that is because Silas represents so many people who love Jesus and are seeking to serve Jesus who know that there was a beginning when as a sinner separated from God they trusted God's grace and were saved by that grace, but they cannot tell you exactly when and where and how that happened. They know that it did and that it has, but they are cannot be precise about the time and place. I believe this kind of story is more typical than we know and far more true to the truth of the Gospel than we care to admit. It is the story of the development of devotion that happens over time. It is the story of Ruth Graham. Billy Graham can tell you of the time in Charlotte under the ministry of Mordecai Hamm that he gave his life to Jesus. Ruth never could identify that precise

moment. But she knew she was saved and it showed in her life. It was not dramatic but developmental. Is that your story? We have created a culture where people with this kind of story think they have no story. But I can tell you that that kind of story is far more powerful than you know. It is a story that encourages because it shows us the way of the work of the grace of God in the secret chambers of the heart even when we cannot see it or comprehend it. It is a story to be shared; it is a testimony to be told.

There is one other story here that is the best of all. It is the story of Timothy. It is a testimony to teaching the Word of God to children. Timothy was the product of a divided home. His father was a pagan Greek; his mother and grandmother were godly women who raised Timothy in the way of God in accordance with the Word of God. These two Godly women stand as a testimony to what all godly women are to do when living in relationship to a pagan husband or I believe what a godly husband is to do when living in relationship to a pagan wife. It is not that Timothy's mother Eunice disrespected her husband but that she knew what her son needed and with the help of her mother Lois they taught this child God's Word and did with His word and through His word what He promises: that word took root in the soil of that young man's soul and he grew toward grace and in grace as a faithful follower of Jesus. Timothy whose name means one who loves God would have had one of those testimonies that would begin something like this: "I do not remember a time when I did not know of Jesus and love Him; I was taught about Him and His cross from birth . . ." What a testimony. What a story. That is Anne's testimony. She knows that she gave her life to Jesus but she doesn't remember a time when she didn't love Him because she had and has a Mom and Dad who love Jesus and taught her to love Him.

I am reading a really good book right now that Glenn Ashe gave me. I wished I could buy a copy for every parent. It is called *Raising a Modern Day Joseph: A Timeless Strategy for Growing Great Kids*. The thesis of this book is simply that we will not see a change in the course of our culture until parents decide what is most important to you in relationship to your children: it is time for us to recognize that academics, athletics, and acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord and living for Him are not issues of equal concern. The last is the only one that carries eternal significance but saying that and showing that are different things. Larry Fowler the author of this book argues that parents have to be intentional about teaching their children the truth of God through the Word of

God at home and partnering with church leaders in childrens and youth ministry so that we have a common strategy lived out in the church and in the home to raise godly children. The best testimony comes from a Timothy who is able to say that from my very first remembrance my mother and my grandmother taught me the truth of God so that I do not remember a day when I did not know Him and love Him. Is that your testimony? Treasure it.

Now, let me talk in closing to any of you here today who do not have a story. Let's turn together to page one right now and let's begin to write your story. It starts this way: I came to realize that I was a sinner separated from God and deserving His judgment but I heard a preacher talking about God wanting to save me from His judgment and forgive me of my sins. That preacher told me about Jesus who died for my sins and wanted to live in and through my life. I had heard it all before but that day it clicked and I gave my life to Jesus that day. That is where it all began.