



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## The Power of Testimony

### Psalms 116:1–8

Josh Caterer | May 28, 2023

In a recent article about advertising techniques, professional PR and marketing expert Simon Grant wrote this: “The importance of testimonials cannot be overstated. Our research tells us that nine out of ten people trust what a customer says about a business more than what that business says about itself. As a result, customers are likely to spend 31% more with a business that has good customer testimonials.”

So testimony is a powerful thing in the world of advertising. It's also a powerful thing in a court of law. In 2018, criminal defense attorney Jarrett Maillet wrote an article about the way evidence is evaluated in court. He said, “In the justice system, eyewitness testimony plays an important role in the determination of guilt. Jurors trust an eyewitness because a firsthand account often seems more credible than hearsay or presented pieces of evidence. If someone was present, saw what happened, recalled it clearly and answered under oath, why shouldn't the jury trust that person's information?”

Testimony is indeed a powerful thing in advertising and in a court of law. It's also a very powerful thing in the life of a Christian. Our testimonies—the way we share our story of what God has done in our lives—have power in a variety of ways.

First of all, our testimony obviously is an important tool for evangelism. If we're talking to non-Christian people about Jesus, a testimony can often be more effective than just giving people information about God, like quoting Bible verses to them or trying to explain theological concepts to them. Things like that can seem like abstractions to people who haven't grown up around them and they aren't familiar with them. They don't know what we're talking about. But a testimony can take these out of the realm of the abstract and make them relatable, make them seem real. It can have the power to soften somebody's heart and make them open to the gospel.

When they see what has happened in your life and what God has given you, they see something they want. “I want to experience that as well.” Now I don't want you to think this message is just about evangelism—about how to reach lost people with the gospel—as important as that is. Our testimonies are powerful in other ways as well, such as within the life of our church as a whole. We share testimonies to encourage each other in our faith. An amazing example of that is when we have baptisms.

Last Sunday we had baptisms in our services. Every time someone gets baptized, they share their testimony along with it. Sometimes there's a video; sometimes we'll have people read their testimonies. So the person with a trembling piece of paper in their hands will be talking about how God got ahold of them, how they came to know the Lord and the difference Jesus has made in their lives since then. I don't know about you, but I always want to hear those stories. When I see people being baptized, it always stirs something up in my heart, because I remember what God has done for me. It reminds me of the way He got ahold of me in the first place. I'm so amazed that He even does this. I'm like, “God, You are so good. Hallelujah!” It makes me want to praise Him all the more.

So testimonies have power to reach the lost and power to encourage other believers, Testimonies can also be powerful in strengthening our own faith, encouraging ourselves in times of need. We go through difficult times and feel overwhelmed. God seems distant from us and we're tempted to despair. In a time like that, one of the most important tools we have is to recall what God has done for us, reminding ourselves of the ways God has been faithful to us and the ways He has undeniably worked in our lives. When we begin to meditate on these things and articulate them in prayer, we're essentially sharing our testimonies with ourselves. This has a way of lifting our spirits like nothing else can. It makes us feel reconnected to God, like we're standing on

solid ground again, no matter what it is we're going through. So it's important for us to have these things at the forefront of our minds, to be able to quickly recall them and clearly communicate them, whether to other Christians, to lost people or to ourselves.

Now, you might be thinking, "Josh, that's all well and good, but I'm no good at that! I know God has been good to me. I know He's blessed me in many ways. But I'm just not good at organizing my thoughts or expressing and communicating these things. I'm just not a testimony kind of person."

Okay. Don't panic; it's going to be fine. We're going to look at a passage of Scripture today that's going to help us with this. Turn to Psalm 116 in your Bibles. We'll look at the first eight verses of this Psalm, where we'll find a kind of "testimony template." We'll see the essential components of what a powerful testimony should have. So let's read Psalm 116:1-8:

<sup>1</sup> I love the LORD, because he has heard  
my voice and my pleas for mercy.  
<sup>2</sup> Because he inclined his ear to me,  
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.  
<sup>3</sup> The snares of death encompassed me;  
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;  
I suffered distress and anguish.  
<sup>4</sup> Then I called on the name of the LORD:  
"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"

<sup>5</sup> Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;  
our God is merciful.  
<sup>6</sup> The LORD preserves the simple;  
when I was brought low, he saved me.  
<sup>7</sup> Return, O my soul, to your rest;  
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.  
<sup>8</sup> For you have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling...

Amen. Now, that's a testimony, right there. I want to talk about some of the general qualities of this testimony, then we'll spend some time looking at verse eight, where we'll find some of the essential components of a powerful testimony.

## General qualities

Let's start with the general qualities of this testimony.

### A testimony is personal.

This Psalm begins with an amazing five-word opening phrase: *"I love the Lord because..."* That's a perfect way to start a personal testimony. Your testimony is basically your way of finishing that sentence. "I love the Lord because \_\_\_\_." The details—where the story goes from there—are going to look different for every person because we all have different stories. If this is your starting point, you really can't go wrong.

A lot of times we're nervous about talking to people about Jesus, especially to an unbeliever, because we don't know if we're going to wind up in a situation where they're asking us a bunch of questions we don't know how to answer. We're going to feel like we're in over our heads. Or maybe we're going to wind up in an argument with somebody, or a debate where we're trying to defend theological positions we don't really feel equipped to communicate. But in truth, we don't have to do that.

Your testimony is not an argument and it's not a debate. It's your own story. Nobody can argue with your own story of what happened to you. You don't have to be an expert theologian; you just have to be an eyewitness. All the theology you need is going to be contained in your story, just like it is contained in the verses we're looking at in Psalm 116. These verses are filled with theological truth about Who God is, how He relates to people— and the plan of salvation. It's all in there; it's just presented as a testimony and that makes it very personal.

### A testimony is relational.

What's being described here is a relationship. He says, *"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice...because he inclined his ear to me."* It's a picture of somebody talking to God and God answering. It's interactive. We want people to know that what we have is a relationship with God.

I'm sure you've heard this phrase, "Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship." That needs to be expressed in the way we talk about our testimony. This is a real relationship with the living God. This is useful not only in communicating with non-Christians, but we also need to remind ourselves of this sometimes when we go through valleys and feel God is distant from us.

We all go through those times. Some of us in this room who have been walking with the Lord for many years can attest to this. It just happens. We go through these seasons when we feel kind of spiritually dry. We might be going through a trial of some kind

and feel like our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. We're wondering, "Where is God in all this?" We get discouraged and start to have doubts. In times like that, we need to be able to recall when God was so real and so present, when His working was so evident in our lives. We need to remember things God has undeniably done for us in our lives. If we can reconnect ourselves to those things, we can find encouragement for our own souls.

That's exactly what's happening in this Psalm, particularly in verse seven: *"Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you."* He's talking to his own soul. He's talking to himself, really. We feel like we're reading a journal entry. He's saying to himself, "Dude, chill. Why are you so freaked out? Don't you remember how good God has been to you? Don't you remember those times when God was there for you? He's the same God. He's still there for you."

Don't let your feelings dictate your perception of reality. The reality is God will never leave you, never forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). He's the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He is faithful (Hebrews 10:23) and you have a relationship with Him.

### **A testimony is honest.**

So a testimony is personal, it's relational, and thirdly, it's honest. What is being shared in this Psalm is some pretty raw stuff, right? He's not sugarcoating his own life story. He's talking about being in distress and anguish, about being brought low. He's pleading with God for mercy. That's a pretty vulnerable story.

We need to be willing to be honest like that, really honest about the low points in our lives, even if it maybe paints us in a light that seems unfavorable because it shows our weaknesses. These are the moments when God really shows up and proves Himself to be real, powerful, merciful and loving. We need to be able to talk honestly about these things, then when we do, God is powerfully glorified. His strength is displayed in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9) and that needs to be part of our testimony.

## **Essential components**

So those are the general qualities of the testimony: personal, relational and honest. Then in verse eight, the testimony is summed up beautifully with three bullet points: *"For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling."* What we see here are three components of a powerful testimony. I want to spend the rest of our time unpacking these three things, one at a time.

### **Salvation**

The first component of a powerful testimony is salvation. It says at the beginning of verse eight, *"For You have delivered my soul from death..."* Many scholars attribute Psalm 116 to King David, who wrote most of the book of Psalms. There's reason to believe he wrote this, although we don't know exactly for sure. It's kind of like the book of Hebrews where scholars are pretty sure it was probably written by Paul, but there's a chance it was somebody else. Now really, it doesn't matter because it's still God's Word.

It's the same deal with Psalm 116. It's probably King David who wrote it, but there's a chance it was somebody else. Either way, this is a divinely inspired piece of writing, so we can take it at face value. We can know the psalmist was someone who had come face to face with death in some way.

We see this in verse three: *"The snares of death encompassed; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me..."* Now, Sheol is a word that people don't use often anymore. It's a Hebrew word that literally means "the place of the dead." In some translations it's rendered as "the grave." It's like "the grave laid hold of me." Think of one of those old thriller movies where this hand just comes shooting up out of the ground and grabs hold of a person. Then it says, *"I suffered distress and anguish."* That's naturally what happens when the grave grabs hold of you and won't let go. You're a little distressed; you're in anguish.

Now was it some sort of near-death experience that caused this? We don't know the exact circumstances because we're not sure if it was David or not. David was a person who had experiences in battle and was pursued by enemies who were trying to kill him. Maybe it was that. Maybe it was somebody who got really sick, they were on their death bed, but then they came back from that, so they felt at that moment like the grave was grabbing hold of them. I'm inclined to think that there may have been some physical threat involved, but that wasn't the thing that was really causing their soul anguish. I believe it was bigger than that. It was a spiritual crisis, what you might call an existential crisis, where this person, having come face to face with death, began to wrestle with their own mortality and the inevitability of death. This was probably what was causing anguish to their souls.

It says in the next verse, *"Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!'"* They're not saying, "Deliver me from the hand of my enemy" nor, "Deliver me from this illness" nor, "Keep me alive!" It's, "Deliver my soul!" They're concerned for their soul. They feel a spiritual anguish that only the Lord can help with. So they call on the name of the Lord. *"O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!"* Their testimony is that when they prayed, the Lord heard their prayer, answered it and delivered their soul from death.

I have to tell you the reason why I love this passage of Scripture so much and chose to preach on it today. Pastor Tim told me, "You're preaching and it's not part of a series, so you can preach on whatever you want." I thought, "Whatever I want? This is a big Book. There's a lot of stuff in there. Can you give me any direction?" He said, "Whatever. As the Lord leads. Just pray about it." So I prayed about it and pretty quickly this passage of Scripture was impressed upon my heart. It has always been a very meaningful passage in my own life because I can relate to it 100%. His story is my story. Some of you are familiar with my testimony. I've shared it here during a message a few years ago. Some other people have told me they've seen videos online. I've shared it in other church situations and there are YouTube videos from that. For those who have not heard, there was this pivotal point in my own story that was a drug-related, near-death experience. I thought I was going to die, so I started to pray to a God whom I had not previously known. What was going on to bring me to that point, what was driving the self-destructive behavior and the substance abuse, what was actually motivating all of that is exactly what he's talking about in this Psalm. I felt the snares of death encompassing my life. I did not know the Lord. I did not have any hope beyond the grave. I came to a point in my life where I started to become really preoccupied with my own mortality. Everything just seemed pointless to me. Life itself seemed pointless. I thought it's all just going to end in total nothingness and annihilation. I thought there was nothing after death. So I thought, "What's the point, then?" I just couldn't shake that feeling.

I tried to run from it. I tried to drink it away. I tried to drug it away. I tried to fill my life with all sorts of things that were going to distract me from it, so I wouldn't have to face the reality of death. But eventually all that stuff didn't work anymore. Just like the author of this Psalm, I began to feel the pangs of Sheol had laid hold on me. There was a near-death experience I had with drugs, but it was part of a larger existential despair I was feeling about life and my soul was in anguish.

Just like the author of this Psalm, I called on the Lord to deliver my soul. God heard and answered my prayer. He showed me that the deliverance I needed and was longing for was found only in the person of Jesus Christ, Who has defeated death and Who offers eternal life to those who trust in Him.

That's the testimony of this psalmist, that God delivered him in that way. That's my testimony. That's your testimony if you're a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. Maybe the details of your life don't look like mine. Maybe you have a totally different story. But we do have this in common: we all came to some point in our lives when we realized that without God's deliverance, our soul is lost. He's the only One Who can help us. So we pray to Him, "Lord, deliver my soul." And he did! He does! Amen.

Now we can say with the author of this Psalm that *"our God is merciful"* and *"when I was brought low, he saved me."* He *"delivered my soul from death."* This is the foundation of our testimonies. Whatever words we want to use to communicate, the power of our testimonies is God's salvation.

## Joy

The psalmist says, *"For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears."* He is describing not only a spiritual problem, but also an emotional problem. The spiritual problem is pending death, which then creates this emotional problem of anguish. When we receive this gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, He solves both problems at once! He sets us free from the sentence of death, which sets us free from the emotional shackles of anguish.

At that point, the Holy Spirit comes in and begins to take up residence in us, enabling us to experience something known as the joy of the Lord. You know the joy of the Lord. I can see some of you smiling and nodding. The joy of the Lord is a beautiful thing. Nehemiah 8:10 says, *"The joy of the Lord is your strength."* Then in the New Testament, joy is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). When you have the Holy Spirit living in you, He produces this God-given joy of the Lord. It's something different than happiness. It may include happiness, but it doesn't always. It's deeper and more profound than that.

I like what the old-time Christian author S.D. Gordon wrote about joy around 100 years ago:

Joy is distinctly a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. But joy has its springs deep down inside, and that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross.

The idea here is that happiness is a feeling that is dependent on circumstances; joy is a feeling that can overcome your circumstances. It transcends your circumstances. Having the joy of the Lord does not mean that you go around with a plastic smile plastered on your face all the time. It doesn't mean you're not supposed to be sad, upset, afraid, anxious.

As a person who's been walking with the Lord for 20-plus years, I can testify that I have felt all of those things regularly over the years as I've gone through the realities of life. But by having the joy of the Lord, I can tell you that I'm not overwhelmed, or overcome by those things anymore because I have a hope I didn't have before. That underlying feeling of hopelessness is gone. That existential despair has been taken away and replaced by eternal hope that is found in Jesus Christ. I have this sense that God is with me, so whatever happens will be for His glory and He will give me the strength to get through it. This has been transformative for me.

To be honest, I've never had a naturally effusive, happy-go-lucky type of personality. That's pretty obvious, right? But something happened when Jesus came into my life. There started to be a difference in me that people close to me started to remark about. I remember somebody used the phrase, "You just seem a little brighter now, like someone found the dimmer switch on you and turned it up a little bit." That's not something I tried to do. It was something that was the natural outflow from the presence of God in my life. I responded, "Yeah, I'm a little brighter. It might be because the Lord has delivered my soul from death and my eyes from tears." That's my testimony. He has given me salvation and He has given me joy.

These are the first two essential components, and some expression of that reality is part of our story as Christians.

## Sanctification

The third part of verse eight says, "*You have delivered my feet from stumbling.*" We're going to call this sanctification. I know, it's kind of a churchy word, but let me define it. I looked it up on dictionary.com and one of the things it said is that sanctification is "the action or process of being purified." The word "sanctify" literally means to set apart for special use. This idea is elaborated on in this quote; I know Wikipedia is not the most reliable resource in the world, but I liked the way they described this, so I'm going to share this because I think it's helpful:

"The term can be used to refer to objects which are set apart from special purposes, like in a religious ceremony or whatever. But the most common use within Christian theology is in reference to the change brought about by God in a believer, begun at the point of salvation, and continuing throughout the life of the believer."

Yeah. Praise God for that. So when this Psalm writer says, "You have delivered my feet from stumbling," he's saying, "God, now that You have delivered my soul from death and my eyes from tears, You're helping me learn to walk properly. I used to have a lot of trouble before You came in."

This is what God does. As we move forward in the Christian life, post-salvation, God works with us to keep our feet from stumbling back into sin and stumbling down the wrong path in life. He sets our feet on the right path. This is part of the baptism stories, when people talk about how God has changed them. "I used to live like this. I used to do all sorts of ungodly things. But now God has changed my direction in life. I'm walking in His ways as best I can." This is called sanctification.

Then just a couple things about sanctification in closing. It's important to notice this component is the last of the three. There's a progression to it. First, He saves your soul. Then He gives you joy. And from there He keeps your feet from stumbling which is the sanctification process.

A lot of times people get these reversed. That can happen with people who don't know the Lord. They'll say, "Ah, I can't come to Jesus right now. I can't go back to church. I'm not ready to pray. I need to get cleaned up first. I need to stop doing x, y or z. I need to get this or that out of my life, then I can come to God and start having a relationship with Him." But just the opposite is true. We are invited to come and bring all our mess and whatever is in our lives to God, get forgiveness and salvation and deliverance, then moving on from there He will begin this process of sanctification.

Even as believers we can get this reversed, We can start to have this approach to the Christian life where we feel like we need to be sanctified enough to earn the salvation we've supposedly been given as a gift. We can think God saved me by His grace, but

now we have to be good enough to deserve it. Here's a news flash: we don't deserve it and we never will. Any goodness that we have in our lives comes as a response to the free gift of salvation and comes in cooperation with this ongoing work that His Spirit is doing in our lives called sanctification. So first is salvation, then it's sanctification.

I also want to point out that this sanctification is a process; it's not an event which means it doesn't happen all at once. You don't get saved, then boom, you're just clean and never sin again. If that were the case, our lives would be entirely different. I think anybody who's been walking with the Lord for any length of time will tell you that you will continue to struggle with a sin nature, needing to ask God's forgiveness for this or that thing along the way, often on a daily basis. Because sanctification is a process. It's a lifelong process, where God, by His Spirit, is shaping us more and more into the image of His Son Jesus Christ—with each passing day, with each passing month, with each passing year.

We're going to make mistakes along the way. We're going to fall down, and God is going to pick us up and keep us moving. This is His promise: *"That he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6). We need to remember this so we don't get discouraged when we make mistakes along the way, when we fear we have lost this gift. We can't lose it. God is faithful.

This ongoing work God does in our lives becomes a component of our testimonies because everybody can relate to it. Everybody can relate to this ongoing awareness of your own imperfection, this sense that you're not living up to God's standard. So we encourage each other, "Don't give up. God is patient with us. God is still with us and is still committed to helping us become more and more like Jesus as He continues this process of sanctification in our lives."

Sharing these stories with each other becomes part of the way we encourage each other, through testimonies in the lives of our church as believers. So all these things are essential components of a powerful testimony: salvation, joy and sanctification. They can serve as the building blocks of our own testimony of faith.

Think about what these look like in your own life. Your testimony doesn't need to be an eloquent argument or a theological dissertation. Just start with, "I love the Lord, because..." then proceed with your eyewitness testimony of what you've experienced. Tell the story of your own relationship with God in a way that is personal and honest, remembering how He has delivered your soul from death, your eyes from tears and your feet from stumbling. And may God receive all the glory.