

“Joyful Testimonies”

Hebrews 10: 23-25 and Philippians 3: 7-14

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Provoke is a strong word. “Why did you hit him?” “He provoked me.” Provoke carries connotations of violence. Yet, the Bible tells us to “provoke one another to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).

The Greek word for provoke means “to create distress or upset.” A couple of Bible examples. This kind of distress happened when Paul and Barnabas had such a heated argument that they refused to travel together. The Bible uses this word to describe how upset they were with each other. They were provoked with each other (Acts 15:39). Another example was when Paul saw so many idols in a Greek city that it nearly made him sick to his stomach, he was distressed—the same word—provoked (Acts 17:16). This is normally a word that carries negative connotations. It implies being moved nearly to violence.

However, in Hebrews, we are told to use what is normally thought of as negative energy to bring about love and good deeds. So how do we *provoke* each other to love and good deeds?

Another way of considering this question would be to consider the various other ways we motivate each other. How about guilt, or threats of punishment, or promises of rewards? Are not these the most common ways we try to motivate people?

The child sits at the table, pushing her peas from one side of the plate to the other. Every so often, when her mom is looking the other way, the child hides a pea under the edge of her plate. How does her mom motivate her daughter to eat the peas? “There are thousands of children starving across the world. They would give anything to be able to eat those vegetables on your plate right now.” I like the child who responded, “Oh yeah? Name two!”

When guilt fails to motivate, we can use threats of punishment or promises of reward. Most of us have experienced the failures of using guilt, punishments, or rewards to motivate people. The Apostle Paul models a different approach. He used his own story—his testimony—to motivate/provoke the Christians in Philippi. Let’s consider how we can share our stories to help others grow in faith.

***7** Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. **8** More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order*

*that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ,[a] the righteousness from God based on faith. **10** I want to know Christ[b] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, **11** if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

***12** Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal,[c] but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ[d] has laid hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold[e] of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly[f] call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3: 7-14)*

From my youth I recall an Arizona politician who used to tell the story of his campaigning on an Indian reservation. He recalled that he gave his traditional stump speech in English, aware that they were bilingual. He was told that even though they mostly spoke their own native language to each other, they would clearly understand him. He began his speech by promising the people that if he were elected his tax cuts would not affect their government benefits. A couple of the respected elders of the village turned to each other and said with a nod, “Ptui.” The politician promised that if he were elected he would stay in touch with their needs, and his office would be available at all times to listen to their concerns. A few people in the crowd smiled at each other, nodded and said, “Ptui. Ptui.” The politician was feeling pretty good. The crowd was obviously with him now. He waxed eloquent as he promised that if elected he would return regularly to visit their villages and see what more he could do for them. By now the whole crowd was chanting together, “Ptui. Ptui.” He finished his speech and was feeling really good about their response. He excitedly accepted the invitation of the village elders to tour their village. The sound of the village chanting their affirmation was still ringing in his head when they walked into a sheep pasture and one of the elders pointed down and said, “Don’t step in the Ptui.”

Did you know Paul used the word “ptui” in his letter to the Philippians? Our Modern Bibles translate Philippians 3 with polite language. Verse 8 is translated as rubbish, garbage, The literal word means “animal dung.” Paul says his former accomplishments, his education, his trusted leadership, his worthwhile activities are merely “animal dung” compared to knowing and loving Jesus Christ. “

Paul was very successful by the standards of his day. He came from a well-off family. He was born into Roman citizenship. He was educated in the best Hebrew college of his day. He was tutored by the leading scholar in the field. He was devoted to his Hebrew traditions, proud of his ancestry, and a leader among his classmates in scholarship. Jesus took this highly successful leader and turned his priorities upside down. What he had cared so much about before, now seemed worthless in comparison to following Christ.

Paul’s testimony was about how a successful person can shift priorities and move from the worries of daily finances and success to the concerns of character, moral compass, integrity, and eternal matters.

Testimonies like Paul's can provoke us to seek God's transformation. Paul's story was an early version of the "evangelistic testimony." The basic format for such a testimony is the description of one's life before and after meeting Jesus.

To be honest, I sometimes hold my breath as someone starts their testimony. I have seen young Christians get a little competitive over whose testimony is the most dramatic. One person says, "I was on drugs and dropped out of school. I got arrested, but then Jesus got hold of me and set me straight." The next person tries to outdo that one by sharing, "I was on drugs, lived on the streets for three years, went to prison for trying to hurt my girlfriend... Then I met Jesus..." It almost feels like the best testimonies have to go from a horrible life of extreme bad choices to a life of joy and perfect peace.

Is it just me or does anybody else have problems with these kinds of testimonies? What about those of us who have not experienced this kind of dramatic conversion? Many who love and follow Jesus came to faith at a young age while growing up in church. We never served time in prison. We never took drugs. We never even kicked the dog. How do we provoke such good-hearted, well-meaning people to continue serving the Lord?

When it comes to sharing our stories, it is worth noting that the Apostle Paul shared different aspects of his own story according to his audience. For instance, he tells of his successes and shift in priorities to the Philippians, who were also Roman citizens residing in a community of successful people. Yet, in his second letter to the Corinthians he gives a different form of his testimony.

Recognizing that their struggles felt difficult and they sometimes wondered why God was not answering their prayers, he shared more of his own struggles while following Jesus. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 Paul described his difficulties after encountering Jesus. Meeting Jesus had not made the rest of his life go easily. Rather, Paul had been imprisoned and beaten for preaching the love of Christ. He had been shipwrecked and lost at sea. He had experienced danger during his travels. His life had been threatened. If that weren't enough, he admitted that his thoughts were often anxious as he tried to trust God.

Sometimes a testimony about how a person's life has changed dramatically from pre-Christ to post-Christ is helpful. Sometimes we need to hear how those of us who are successful still need to refocus our priorities. And sometimes we just need to hear that it is okay to struggle even when we are following Jesus. We are all weak, confused, and sometimes find ourselves in bad situations. These things happen even while we love and trust Jesus.

Have I shared the story about the night a Tlingit man tried to slice my throat in that little Alaskan village? A man waved a knife close to my throat and held me trapped for about a half hour. He was high on drugs and wasn't making sense. He said something about my preaching on the television that had made his sister cry. I had never preached on television, but there was no reasoning with him. He shoved the knife under my chin and said he was going to kill me. It was the only time while we lived among the Tlingit people that I truly believed my life was in danger.

Let me be honest here. It was mostly my own fault. Kate and I had recently had a conversation about my ministry to drunks in the middle of the night. It was pretty common for drunks to knock on the front door asking for prayer from the village pastor. She said their loud voices were upsetting our young children, so I had agreed to always step out onto the front porch and close the door behind me when a drunk came by in the night. That night, when I stepped out on the small front steps, I heard the door lock behind me and realized that I was trapped. That was when the drugged-up man pulled the knife.

It felt like hours as I tried to reason with him. It was probably not more than half an hour. He waved his knife and made his threats that I had hurt his sister. He was obviously provoked about something. When he finally walked away, I called the village police and learned that this man had just been released from prison. They promised to keep an eye on him and told me to call if he threatened me again.

A couple days later I spotted him staggering down the street toward our home. I told Kate to call the police. To this day, I don't know what I was doing. I was in a pure panic. While she was on the phone, I rushed to the bathroom, climbed into the bathtub, and pulled the shower curtain. Why I thought that shower curtain would save me, I have no idea (I've seen "Psycho"). All I know is that I wanted to hide. Within a few days the man was back in prison.

In Paul's various letters he shared his stories of his struggle, loss, past accomplishments, threats and survivals. In his most positive letter where the joy bubbles to the surface and flows over his words, the Apostle Paul shifts his story from looking back on his past life, toward what he hopes for his future. For Paul, his past, as successful as he had been, was nothing more than Ptui compared to the joy of pressing on—"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13).

Paul's story in his letter to the Philippians reminds us that our story can be one of hopefulness about our future, not just rehashing the sorrows and struggles of the past. How about this as an outline? "God isn't finished with me yet. I may not be where I want to be, but I am not where I was. Let me tell you not just where I was, but where I am headed."