



Preparing to Share My Story

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Sharing Your Story

Developing A Personal Testimony

Your unique experience in coming to Christ can be an effective tool in communicating the good news about what God has done in your life. A carefully prepared testimony adapts well to either group situations or casual one-on-one conversation. It enables you to speak confidently, knowing that your words are well-chosen, biblically accurate, and appropriate to the situation.

The body of an effective testimony generally includes three parts: **what your life was like before you received Christ, how you received Christ, and how your life is different as a result of receiving Christ.** This is sometimes referred to as the Before/How/After format. Then you would only need to add an attention-getting introduction and a brief concluding thought.

Before You Start

Ask the Lord to guide your thoughts and written words. Then **trust Him to do so.** Remember, your story can bring glory to Him and also be a plan for the salvation of others.

Write as if you were sharing with just **one person.** "Many first-time speakers make the mistake of speaking to a group instead of an individual. But if you write as if you are talking to one person, your testimony will be more direct. Each person in your audience will feel that you are sitting beside him or her personally to share your life."
{1}

Keep it short. Three minutes (about 1½ - 2 pages typewritten double-spaced) gives you enough time to explain your experience and include a clear presentation of the gospel. That length causes you to be very selective about what you communicate.

Consider using a theme (see sample testimony #2). A theme is a phrase or idea that is stated in the introduction, woven throughout the body of the testimony, and then restated in the conclusion. It helps to keep the testimony on track and aids in the listener's understanding and retention.

You will find some helpful samples in the later pages of this document. The Bible itself provides a good example to follow in Acts 22, 23, and 26. There Paul utilizes the "Before/How/ After" format which we will follow.

Putting It on Paper

Start with the body of the testimony. Later, you will add the introduction and conclusion. You will proceed by writing each of the five sections in the following order:

- Before you received Christ
- How you received Christ
- After you received Christ
- Introduction
- Conclusion

Because you are trying to **be concise**, the following tips may help you as you begin to put your ideas on paper:

- Before actually writing the body of the testimony, **jot down ideas, thoughts, and events** as you go through the questions that follow in the sections called "Before you received Christ," "How you received Christ," and "After you received Christ."
- Decide **what is most important** to your testimony. Avoid being too explicit or sensational.
- **Arrange** your events, ideas, and thoughts in a **logical order** of presentation.
- Develop these brief **thoughts and ideas in sentences.**
- Tie them together with other sentences in a concise, meaningful way.

Before you received Christ

- What things were most important to you? What did your life revolve around? (Examples: money, marriage, career, etc.)
- Why were they so important? What basic need were you attempting to fulfill?
- How did you try to satisfy that need?

Some tips . . .

- **Start at a time in life which relates to your experience with Christ.** Remember that this is not a biography from childhood. If you became a Christian as a child, but cannot remember making a specific decision to accept Christ, concentrate on describing your life before it began to change and use that material as the "before" portion.
- **Don't be discouraged or intimidated** by other testimonies you may have heard involving dramatic conversions and radical lifestyle changes. Vonette Bright and Barbara Ball, in their book *The Joy of Hospitality* write:

"A personal testimony is not simply a story of how God rescued someone from a life of horrible sin. It is an account of how God transforms lives—no matter where the person comes from or what circumstances the person has experienced. Many people are encouraged by the testimony of someone who was introduced to the Lord at an early age and who then avoided many pitfalls of growing up. God uses each of us as we are, created in His image and transformed by His power." {2}

How you received Christ

- When did you first hear the message of Christ and what was your reaction?
- When did you first begin to feel positive toward the gospel and why?
- Why did you make the decision to trust Christ and how did you specifically do that?

Some tips . . .

- In answering these questions you are seeking to identify specifically the process that brought you to the point of receiving Christ. **This is the climax of your testimony.**
- It is important to emphasize that this is a decision that one makes as an act of his/her will. If you came to Christ as a child, your "decision" may have been more of a process. For you, the "when" is not as important as the assurance that Christ is now in your life.
- In this "How" portion, attempt to present the basics of the gospel clearly and concisely. This may be the only opportunity for a person to know how to become a Christian.

After you received Christ

- How did Christ specifically satisfy the basic need you stated in the before section?
- What changes have occurred in your life as a result?
- How do you *know* Christ is in your life?

Some tips . . .

- Be practical in describing the changes in your life since you became a Christian. Describe how God is helping you learn how to trust Him more. Give examples of ways you have changed or principles you have discovered in God's Word and how you have applied them in your daily life.
- Be sure to mention that you are not perfect now! You still have many problems every day, but Christ enables you to face them realistically and to solve them God's way. You are not perfect, but you are forgiven and progressing.
- Practical areas that Christ has changed might include relationships, goals and priorities, good or bad habits, attitudes, the atmosphere in your home, etc.

The Introduction

- **Consider two different versions:** one to use in a group setting and one to use with individuals. Both introductions need to be memorized word for word so that getting started is made easier and smoother.
- If sharing your testimony with a group, **your opening sentence** will be more formal than it would be in a conversation with a friend. Consider using an interesting quote, a startling question, or an illustration that really captures their attention. An example would be, "One of the richest men in the world, John D. Rockefeller, was once asked, 'How much money would it take to satisfy you?' Smiling, he quickly replied, 'Just a little more.'"
- If sharing with an individual, the **opening statement should relate** to where he or she is and include a teaser that piques his or her curiosity about the gospel. Examples are: "Bringing up children in this world can be difficult. Apart from one factor, I would be lost as to knowing how to raise mine." "When I was in college I had everything a person could want, yet underneath, I was dissatisfied."

The Conclusion

- Your conclusion should be a summary statement of one or two sentences referring back to your initial basic need and the fact that **Christ now fills that need**. An example would be, "I made this decision over nineteen years ago. It was the most important decision I have ever made. During this time I've had a growing sense of purpose, peace, and fulfillment based on my personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not based on my successes in life."
- Remember that your goal is to explain what Christ has done in your life and to stimulate them to think about their own lives. **Do not preach.**
- **Leave your audience with a challenging thought.** Keep in mind that they will generally comment on the last thing you say.

- **Avoid** tacking a Scripture verse onto the end. It is much better to put it in the "Before/How/After" portion where it best relates.

Some Helpful Hints

- Do consider writing more than one draft. Ask others to critique it using the questions listed in section IV "A Final Check."
- Do rehearse your testimony until you are able to give it naturally.
- Don't use Christian lingo. Words or phrases familiar to a Christian may be strange or nonsensical to a non-Christian. Examples are "asking Jesus into my heart," "saved," "converted," "convicted," "born again."
- Don't be too wordy. Have a clear point and direction to your words.
- Don't emphasize how bad you were.
- Don't speak in glittering generalities, such as "wonderful," "glorious," etc.
- Don't speak critically or negatively about any other group or individual.
- Don't mention churches or denominations by name.
- Do be realistic. Share how Christ enables you to walk *through* your problems, rather than removing them from your life.

You now have completed the basic parts to a personal testimony. You have the body, consisting of the Before/How/After sections, as well as an attention-getting introduction and a conclusion that gives your listener something to think about.

Remember that a personal testimony is dynamic in that **it is constantly changing**. From time to time you may want to change your theme or update your specific details. Seasons of life change what we emphasize in our testimony.

The goal is to communicate effectively with your audience, whether it is a college student or a roomful of faculty wives. **Preparation is the key**. That is what this information is meant to do—equip you to share confidently in a well-thought out way as God opens doors of opportunity especially for you.

A Final Check

To aid in refining what you have written you may want to use the following questions to help you make a final check.

- How does this testimony come across? Do any parts of it sound patronizing, preachy, cutesy, etc.?
- Is the introduction attention-catching if speaking to a group and realistic if speaking to an individual?
- Is the "before" portion of the testimony understandable? Do I specify a clear need?
- Is the gospel so simple and clear that a non-Christian would be able to receive Christ as a result of hearing it?
- Is the "after" portion of my testimony realistic or does it sound as if my life is now problem-free?
- Is my conclusion a good synopsis of my testimony or does it leave the listener hanging?

- If I used a theme, was it woven throughout my testimony?
- Does it avoid or explain religious terms that would not be understood by a non-Christian?
- Do I say anything in my testimony that would be offensive to a particular person, group, or denomination?
- How would my testimony make a non-Christian feel about Christianity?

Personal Testimony Work Sheet

Use this work sheet to outline your testimony using the tips and suggestions recommended on the "Sharing Your Story" sheet. Once you have the skeleton, it will be easier to complete the body of the testimony.

I. Before I received Christ:

II. How I received Christ:

III. After I received Christ:

IV. Introduction Ideas:

V. Conclusion Ideas:

Personal Testimony Work Sheet

Use this work sheet to outline your testimony using the tips and suggestions recommended on the "Sharing Your Story" sheet. Once you have the skeleton, it will be easier to complete the body of the testimony.

I. Before I received Christ:

II. How I received Christ:

III. After I received Christ:

IV. Introduction Ideas:

V. Conclusion Ideas:

Appendix A

Conversion Scenarios

Your personal experience with Christ will probably fall into one of the following three formats. Choose the one that best describes you:

Format 1: Adult Conversion.

You trusted Christ as an adult. You have a distinct **before, how, and after.**

Format 2: Early Conversion, Adult Full Commitment.

You made a decision for Christ as a child, but your life was characterized by spiritual immaturity—a lifestyle similar to that of a non-Christian—until you made a later commitment of your life to Christ. Evaluate whether your early conversion was genuine. If not, use Format 1.

Format 3: Early Conversion, Consistent Growth.

You probably grew up with Christian parents and have a strong church background. You have very little **before.**

Here are some questions that will help you get started in writing out your testimony. This will give you a basis from which to write sentences and paragraphs about your own experience.

As you write your first draft, follow these guidelines:

Format 1: Adult Conversion

Before

1. What was a deep inner need in your life before you met Christ?
2. Give some examples of how you tried to meet or fulfill that need with unsatisfactory solutions.

How

1. Describe the circumstances that caused you to consider Christ.
2. State how you trusted Christ. (Briefly include the gospel.)

After

1. Give an example of how Christ is currently meeting your deep inner needs.
2. End with a statement to the effect that you know for certain that you have eternal life.

Format 2: Early Conversion, Adult Deeper Commitment

Before Deeper Commitment

1. What was a deep inner need you were trying to fill?
2. Give some examples of how you tried to fill that inner need through unsatisfactory solutions.

How

1. Briefly describe the situation in which you made a deeper commitment to Christ.
2. Refer to your conversion experience. State how you trust Christ. (Briefly include the gospel.)

After

1. State how Christ is currently meeting your deep inner needs.
2. End with a statement to the effect that you know for certain that you have eternal life.

Format 3: Early Conversion, Consistent Growth

Before

1. State what deep inner needs you see people trying to fill.
2. Describe how you see people trying to satisfy those needs.

How

1. Explain why you haven't experienced this problem to the same degree.
2. Refer to your conversion experience. State how you trust Christ. (Briefly include the gospel.)

After

1. Illustrate how Christ is meeting your deep inner needs.
2. End with a statement to the effect that you know for certain that you have eternal life.

Appendix B

Examples of Testimonies

Example 1

They call the winning goal I scored in the last game of the 1972 Canada/Russia hockey series 'The Goal of the Century.' I still get a warm feeling when I think about it.

Fear is one of the best motivators, and I was very afraid that I would be part of the team that lost to the Russians. Canada is not a big nation, but hockey is our game. Everyone on the team felt a responsibility to win. I had confidence that our team was better than the Russians, but it never entered my mind that it would be me that scored that last goal. It certainly gave me a stature that I would not have had without it. I wish I could have handled things a little better at that point, been more mature. If I had a spiritual dimension to my life at the time, I know I would have.

Back then, I had fulfilled most of my boyhood dreams, and I knew I was a very fortunate and blessed individual. Yet there was restlessness, a discontentment in the centre of my being that I could not ignore. I was angry, bitter and frustrated, and there were things about my life that I didn't know how to handle. Things were not going well with the Maple Leafs, the team I was playing on, and I was having a lot of conflicts with the owner. Here I was playing in the NHL, doing something that I had always strived for, but I had become more bitter and angry than I had ever been in my life.

So I started drinking as a way to soothe the pain. I think if you are frustrated and angry, you look for a way out. You get with the boys and you try to 'make merry,' but you wake up the next morning and it's there again.

Fortunately, a friend encouraged me to examine the claims of Jesus. He told me that I hadn't taken care of my soul and had never really looked at what it was on the inside. That made sense to me, so I started to read the Bible and look into Jesus. Jesus claimed to be God, and He said He loved me and wanted to give me eternal life. After a two-year search, I became convinced He loved me and wanted me to get to know Him.

However, it was a real struggle for me to become a Christian for a number of reasons. First, I had always prided myself in being a self-made man. I was used to being in control of my life. I was also afraid of what my friends would think. Third, I still looked at Christianity's 'dos' and 'don'ts' and thought that it was so narrow. How could I be a 'man's man' and a Christian, I thought. I was worried that I would have to give up too much. Finally, I read in the Bible that if I really loved God I wouldn't be afraid to tell others about Him. But if I became a Christian I didn't want to tell anyone about it. That led to a lot of frustration, because I was not able to step over the line.

One day I just couldn't fight it any longer. I threw all my fears aside and I said to God: 'I am fearful, and I don't want to tell anyone about this.' And then I gave my life to the Lord.

Since that day, I have never been the same. God has had a positive impact in every area of my life. Most importantly, He has taken away my anger and bitterness. My life certainly hasn't been trouble-free. One of the most challenging times in my life was when my wife was in the hospital and we thought we were going to lose her. I was mad at God, but I realized that night that life is a gift from God, and I decided right then to place everything in my life in His hands. He had proven Himself to me over the years with His faithfulness, and I knew that I had no choice but to surrender my life to Him. Now the inner quietness, contentment and peace I experience on a daily basis assures me that His promise to love and care for me is true and real. And best of all, I look forward to spending eternity with Him.

Example 2

My disappointment was intense as I watched my shot disappear into the bunker on the last hole, and with it, my chances of winning the 1994 Masters. But that was only the beginning of my disappointments. For the next two years I failed to win the U.S. Open, finishing in second place each time. I was struggling with self-doubt, and I dreaded to hear what I knew my critics would say: that I could never win the big one.

These feelings of self-doubt were not new to me. When I was 15-years-old, our football team won the state championship. I was third-string quarterback, so I just sat on the bench the whole time watching the other guys play. I didn't play a down all year.

When we got back to town, we had a big parade then went back to the school gym to have a pep rally. Everyone was so excited. They had a big band playing and everybody was hugging and 'high-fiving.' But I remember just sitting there and feeling completely isolated, because I didn't really help the team win the championship. I felt like I was a failure. I just wasn't good enough. You get that a lot in sports. That sense of 'You're only as good as your last performance.'

As I sat there in the gym, the feeling of 'I don't matter' was so overwhelming that I could hardly stand it. I had tried my hardest. I had tried to be good for my parents, good for my team, good for my friends, good for God. With each failure I'd just feel worse and worse. That led to some introspection on my part, which wasn't at all normal for me at the time. I thought, 'What is it that gives life meaning? Why am I here? Why am I so miserable?'

As luck would have it, my coach was a Christian, and he invited me out to a meeting of some Christian athletes. For the first time I heard people talking about God and the unconditional love He has for us; the unconditional acceptance He has for us. I thought that was exactly what I was looking for. I wanted to feel that I was loved, that I was valued despite my failures. With God, I suddenly realized that I did matter. I mattered enough to God that he died for me. That was an incredible thought. It choked me up, and it made me realize that I was important.

Right then I asked God to come into my life. And I've never had a feeling like that since. The feeling of guilt on my shoulders just disappeared. Tears of joy flowed out of my eyes. I felt peace and contentment like I had never known.

Shortly after I lost the two U.S. Opens, I won the British Open and the PGA Tour Championship. I was even ranked the best player in the world. But after all the celebrations, I was the same person with the same problems. You think victory will change your life, that life's going to be better because you won a golf tournament. But when things are all over, you still get mad at your wife, still resent your parents and you even have new problems from all the sudden notoriety.

The Bible says that all men are like grass and their glory like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fade. I found this to be true in my life. Victory is great, but it is ultimately empty. Even the thrill of winning the British Open fades.

So what does last? My relationship with God and with others. They are what gives life meaning. Regardless of what anyone says about me or how I feel about myself, my wife and kids think I'm great. They love me. But more importantly, God loves me. And, ultimately, He's the only one who matters.

Example 3

It happened quickly. As the van went around the bend, I hardly had time to warn my husband to hold on. The van spun out of control and rolled upside down in the ditch. Incredibly, we were unharmed.

Jumbled in the wreckage lay the musical gear I was taking on tour. That night, in that cold, dark ditch, I realized God was giving me a second chance at life.

Up to this point, my life had been a mess. Born and raised in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, I am the second youngest in a family of five. Deception became the norm for me early in life. Before I had even started school, my oldest brother was sexually abusing me. Compounded with a mentally unstable and alcoholic father, I discovered how to hide shame and guilt at a tender age.

The first of many tragedies struck my family when I was only 11. My father was distraught after my mother suddenly walked out on him, taking the children with her. Six months later, he took his own life. Within months of my father's untimely passing, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

During this time, my mother, sister and I started attending a church. One night after a youth rally, I stood by my mother's bedside and told her the incredible thing that had happened to me-I had asked Jesus into my heart.

The following summer, my mother passed away. I was 15. My younger sister and I were left with the 'wicked' stepfather. I had to grow up fast. Life was sad, but I leaned hard on my faith and the gifts God has blessed me with. Tragedy struck again later when my oldest brother died of an accidental heroin overdose.

At this point I was beginning to feel numb, ready for anything to happen. In my later teens, I moved away from home and no longer thought about God. I started to live a wild life, losing myself in parties, booze and drugs.

At 18, I was accepted into one of the top theatre programs at a Toronto university. I married at 21 after my two-year stint in professional theatre. We set out to follow our dream of fame and fortune in the music world. We soon took the Canadian country music scene by storm, gathering numerous awards and nominations.

Amongst the success and struggle, not a glimpse of my former spiritual life could be found. I quietly swept my faith in God under the carpet. I didn't think I needed Him any longer. Feeling stunted, trapped and unloved in the marriage, I began seeking fulfillment outside of it. Drugs, booze and sex played a big part in numbing the insanity of leading a desperately unhappy double life. However, this new lifestyle went against the values I once held dear, and I started to hate myself. I felt lost, empty and unloved. I pleaded with God to show me a way out of this horrid mess.

That's when the accident happened. It was a big turnaround for me. I said, 'Okay, God, I can't live like this anymore. I'm giving myself to you once again.' This started my healing journey.

With God's help, I've been able to deal with the pain in my life. His healing hand came into my heart and touched me. It is miraculous what the Lord can do in a life when the reins are handed over to Him. God is so alive and real. With Him in control, I have a peace that lives and breathes in me, no matter what obstacles I face in my life.

As a teenager, the sudden death of my father was very difficult for me. I was already heading into rebellion, but his death-along with the deterioration of my relationship with my mother-hurled my life into self-destruction.

At 19, I moved to the west coast, determined to have a new beginning. Within three months, I met Tom. We began living together two months later. We fought our way through the next year-and-a-half. I believed the solution to the turmoil was to get married. The following year, in 1971, we did. In 1973, our son, Pernell, was born. One year later, I was pregnant again. After much turmoil, I decided to have an abortion. Then, in 1976, our daughter Sara was born.

By age 30, I was becoming dependent on prescription drugs, and I experienced depression and thoughts of suicide as a consequence of post-abortion syndrome. I considered taking the children and trying to find a new beginning apart from Tom. I would have done so if he had not persuaded me that the children and I belonged with him.

In 1981, Jonathan was born. Tom was laid off a year later and could not find a job. So I went to work. I enjoyed the responsibility that came with my position, along with the elegant dinners, positive attention and relationships outside of my marriage. But there was a price-long days and weekends at the office and regrets at night.

Five years later, having barely seen my children, having no relationship with my husband and having unhealthy relationships outside of my marriage, my longtime friend Barb took me for a walk and said, 'Marilyn, ever since I've known you, all you ever wanted was to be a mom and a wife. If you don't make changes now, you will come home one day and find your kids have grown up without you.'

I knew she was right. In October 1987, I put the kids in the car and drove away.

My first and biggest challenge came when I tried to obtain custody of our three children. Because I had worked for five years outside the home, I could not presume that I would be granted custody. Before I left the office for court, my manager, Jim, offered to pray for me. I had turned to him for advice, because he was a gentleman whose life was a marked contrast to mine. When Jim mentioned prayer, I reluctantly agreed. But as soon as he said 'Amen,' I bolted for the door.

To my amazement, the judge granted joint-custody with equal access to both my husband and myself. At last I knew that there was a God who must love me, as Jim had often told me. I ran out to call Jim. As he answered the phone, I blurted out: 'Okay, I want to know more about this God of yours. You obviously have a direct line, and I'm prepared to listen.'

In the following weeks, Jim shared more with me about Jesus. He told me God loved me and created me to know Him personally. He also told me I wasn't experiencing God's love in my life was because I was insisting on going my own way.

As Christmas approached that year, I realized that for the first time since becoming a mom, I would be spending the holidays without my children. On December 22, as I drove Jim to the airport, he pointed out how badly my life was going, and urged me again to give my life to God. Jim told me that the Bible said if I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in my heart that God raised Him from the dead, I could be rescued from my hopelessness. 'Where does it say that?' I challenged him. He answered. Accurately. Word for word.

So I prayed, repeating what Jim said. I never thought that it would change anything. However, before I said 'Amen,' something profound had happened inside me. For the first time in my life, the emptiness inside me was gone. I knew I could really start over.

In the 13 years since that night, I have gone through many storms, but my life has slowly changed. My old habits of smoking and drinking, angry tirades and unhealthy relationships have faded away. As I read the Bible and pray, an unexplainable peace presides over every day and every circumstance.

Today, with all of life's struggles, I cannot imagine trying to cope with life alone, without the assurance that God is in control. I can honestly say that I have a new life. God gave me my new beginning.