



Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 18, 1987, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 9:25

“One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.”

WHAT IS A GREAT WITNESS? (2)

Last Lord’s Day we directed our attention to the question, “What is a great witness?” and we focused our thoughts upon the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John and the story of how our Lord restored sight to the man born blind. This man, we discovered, was, in truth, a great witness to the life-changing power of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is worth noting, in passing, that there is not a single story of the giving of sight to the blind anywhere in the Old Testament, nor is this function anywhere attributed to the followers of Jesus.

Now you remember, of course, that in legal terminology, a “witness” is someone who saw an event and was therefore a part of the event. He stands up in court and says, “This is the truth about it. This is how it actually happened.” Now as a Christian I am called and challenged to tell people what I know about Jesus, what my eyes have seen and my ears have heard and my hands have handled of the Word of life (1 John 1:1). In a word, I am commissioned to tell the world what Jesus has done for me! “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see!”

We discussed that this blind man to whom Jesus gave sight was a great witness for two reasons:

- (1) because **he had a great story to tell**, and
- (2) because, to a very great extent, **he stood alone**.

Today we note two further reasons why he was a great witness.

1. The man born blind shows us that a great witness is a man who speaks up with courage. Because it was the Sabbath Day, the Pharisees, the watchdogs of the Sabbath, convened a little court of enquiry and summoned this former blind beggar to appear before them.

They demanded that he describe in detail exactly how this alleged miracle of healing took place. But when he told them about Jesus making the muddy ointment and putting it on his eyes and telling him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam, the coin dropped in their bigoted minds. Here was plainly a case of Sabbath breaking! So, obviously the Healer was a sinner, and He could not possibly perform a miracle of healing.

“What have you to say?” they asked the man; “It was your eyes that He opened.” And the man replied, “He is a Prophet,” meaning “a man of God.” But, certain that he must be lying, they

summoned his parents. “Is this your son?” they asked; “You say that he was born blind? How is it that he can now see?” Surely, we would have expected them to reply, “Yes, this is our boy. He was born blind. He felt ashamed and guilty about it as he grew up. He can see now because Jesus opened his eyes. Praise be to Jesus!” But no. The parents virtually disassociated themselves from their son and from his Healer. “Ask him. He’s of age. He can speak for himself,” they blurted out.

Obviously, they were afraid of the religious authorities, and with good reason, because the Gospels tell us that the religious leaders had agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, or said anything good about Jesus at all, would be expelled from the synagogue. So, they dismissed the man’s parents, and brought the man back himself. Although they did not deny the miracle of healing, they demanded simply that he give praise to God and confess Jesus to be a sinner. That would be like asking a man successfully operated upon for a cataract to call his eye surgeon a man of loose moral character! He doesn’t care about his ophthalmologist’s moral character! “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. All I know is this: once I was blind, but now I see.”

Well now, that really angered the religious bloodhounds, who demanded that he describe again exactly how this miracle of healing took place. Impatiently the man retorted, “Look, why do you want to know again? I told you once and you paid no attention. Do you also want to become His disciples?” Well, that set their Pharisaic blood pressure soaring! “We are Moses’ disciples,” they thundered. “We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow Jesus, we don’t know where He comes from.”

“All right,” thinks the man born blind. “I’ll just keep my mouth shut, and let them have the last word, because that will satisfy them.” But how do you silence a man delirious with joy because he has received his sight, and who feels that he has been reborn? How do you get him to denounce his Benefactor?

What actually happened was that this former blind beggar’s boldness turned into sarcasm. “Why,” he said, “this is an extraordinary thing. Here is a man who opened my eyes, and you say you don’t know where He comes from! To open the eyes of a man born blind has been unheard of since the world began. If this man were not from God He could do nothing.” And down came the big stick! “Who are you to teach us lessons,” they thundered, “born and bred in sin as you are?” And they expelled him from the synagogue.

“Well, there you have it,” thought the man born blind, “I just shouldn’t have opened my big mouth!” And yet, we can’t help admiring the sheer courage of this man’s witness. He didn’t belong to the silent majority who say, “Oh, you know, we don’t talk about our religion. We let our lives speak. We don’t actively evangelize; we witness through caring.” No. No. Christ had done something unspeakably wonderful for this man. He had ushered him out of a world of darkness into a world of glorious light. He had given his life meaning and purpose and power, and he just wanted to go around and tell everybody about it! A great witness doesn’t shut up—he speaks up.

There was a letter some time ago in one of our Christian magazines, written by a pastor in

India. He expressed astonishment at the reticence of Christian people, even in missionary lands, to say a good word for Jesus Christ, for fear that they might be thought to be self-righteous. He said, “Surely I’m not to be considered self-righteous when I tell another person that what I couldn’t do for myself, God, in Jesus Christ, has done for me. And if I tell a sick man that I once had the same disease and found a doctor who wonderfully healed me, am I being self-righteous when I say that I think the same doctor can heal him?”

Do you remember those three people whom I introduced at the beginning of the sermon last Lord’s Day? There was that Russian girl standing on a main street of Leningrad handing out postcards on which is printed Christian poetry which she has written. Her name is Aïda Strypnakovak. When last heard of, she was in a prison camp, 300 miles east of Moscow. This is her second imprisonment. She was arrested for refusing to keep her mouth shut. She is an out-and-out Christian like many other believers in the Soviet Union. She goes around telling people about Christ. Listen to what she wrote to one of the Russian newspapers. Imagine the impact of these words upon the editor! “As regards your anti-religious propaganda, we Christians do not fear it nor oppose it. Do you think that a person who has really accepted Christ into his heart will be deceived by your lies?” Well, of course, the newspaper branded her a religious fanatic, and had something to do with her being arrested. For starting a prayer and Bible study group in prison she was put in solitary confinement. One prisoner said, “She speaks to everybody about Jesus Christ.” That is a great and courageous witness!

What about you? Have you ever realized that there may be people you know, perhaps work with, or go to school with, perhaps relatives of yours, who will be lost eternally if you do not share Jesus Christ with them through your personal witness? I hope that awesome thought will keep you awake nights, until you muster the courage to make a sincere and passionate witness for the Savior—a witness that will introduce that friend to Him, and enable salvation to come to that lost soul.

2. The man born blind shows us that a great witness is a person who commits his life in faith unreservedly to Jesus Christ. Now he did that because he had no other alternative. There was no other place he could go. He had been expelled from the synagogue, which was the most severe penalty that could be inflicted on any first-century Jew, a far worse fate than physical blindness. As long as he was blind, people pitied him and helped him. He was an object of public charity. But now that he could see and was expelled from the synagogue, nobody would befriend him, or give him a job, or do business with him, or associate with him in any way. Worse still, he was cut off from his religious heritage, forbidden to worship the God of his fathers in the believing community. This man must spend the rest of his life in ignoble isolation, deprived of liberty and status and privilege. Left in that predicament his second state could conceivably have been worse than his first.

Here Jesus reenters the drama. Hearing about this man’s courage and loneliness and subsequent punishment, Jesus came looking for him; and that is truly significant, because it means that Jesus never leaves any person to bear his witness alone. He seeks him out, and supports him, and confirms him in his faith. To the former blind beggar, he said, “You have faith in the Son of God?” The man asked, “Well, tell me Who He is, Sir, that I may place my faith in Him.” Jesus said, “You have seen Him. It is He Who is talking to you!” The man said, “Lord, I

believe,” and bowed his knee before Him in adoring worship.

Then Jesus administered the second cure. Having restored the man’s physical vision, He now opened the eyes of his soul. To this former blind beggar Jesus made promises which to us are the most precious promises in the Gospel—the very promises that make it possible for us to go on witnessing.

“I am the Door,” said Jesus (John 10:9). If ever a door, even the door of the institutional church, is closed in our face, let us repose our faith entirely in Christ, and we shall find Him to be the Door to the truth about God, and the opportunity of serving God.

“I am the Good Shepherd,” said Jesus (John 10:14). When the world withholds its protecting care, and you are misunderstood, and stand alone, remember, you are not alone—the Good Shepherd has never lost a sheep, and He will lead you beside still waters; He will always restore your soul.

“I am the Light of the world,” said Jesus (John 8:12); and if ever the world envelops you in the darkness of hostility and resentment and ostracism, have faith in Christ, for in His transforming friendship you will find the light of eternal life.

To believe these promises, and to live on the basis of them, is what it means to be a great witness.

I think this poor blind man, to whom our Lord gave both physical and spiritual sight, must have been in the mind of Johnson Oatman when he wrote,

“Did ever saint find this Friend forsake him?
No, not one! No, not one!
Or sinner find that He would not take him?
No, not one! No, not one!
Jesus knows all about our struggles,
He will guide till the day is done;
There’s not a Friend like the lowly Jesus,
No, not one! No, not one!”

Bruce Marsh was a well-known Canadian broadcaster. He died some years ago at the untimely age of 48. All his life he suffered from a hereditary heart condition, knowing that he might not live beyond middle age. Two years before his death the doctors raised his hopes by recommending him for a heart transplant. In fact, he spent the last few months of his life at the Stanford Medical Center in California waiting for the gift of a new heart. He died before one became available.

In those last months he gave many interviews in the newspapers, on radio and television, telling people about the resources which enabled him and his family to face the possibility of his early death. And always he said the same thing, “We are Christians. We believe in Jesus Christ. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. We believe in the life everlasting!” That was his

great witness. And his message affected people profoundly. Even the most worldly and sophisticated people, who made no profession of Christian faith, and with whom he was associated every day in the world of the media, were confronted by this dying man with the timeless Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. His faithful witness also gave new heart to countless committed Christians.

Bruce Marsh had a great story to tell.

He sometimes stood alone.

He always spoke up with courage.

He committed his life in faith to his Savior.

That was his great witness.

May it be your great witness and mine too!

“This one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see!”

AMEN.