

## Personal Testimony

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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I have visited many of you in your homes and asked about your experience. As yet, some may know but little of mine. Today, I want to share with you my personal testimony—how I became a Christian and a Seventh-day Adventist.

### **What is One's Testimony?**

First though, What is one's personal testimony? The Bible's earliest reference is to the ark of the testimony, the gold-lined box in which was kept the two stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written (Exodus 25:21, 22, 16; 26:33, 34; 31:18, etc.). The testimony was the Ten Commandments.

We know that God's Ten Commandment law is a thumbnail sketch of His character. Testimony, in one sense, is one's character, his behavior. The commitments one makes and keeps are a testimony about his faithfulness and values. In the center of the center of the camp of Israel was the ark of the testimony. How Israel testified to God's character was a core issue.

In the Bible, sometimes God testifies about a certain individual. Other times, a certain individual testifies about God. One's testimony may or may not be received; that is beside the point. He is called to testify regardless. In the case of God, God does not receive the testimony of man (John 5:34). Still, we are to testify for the sake of others.

In ancient times, the testimony of a man was very important. If two men testified to something, this was strong evidence that it was true. The justice system that God set up through revelation to Moses was different from that seen today. Under God's system, no less than two witnesses were required for the death penalty, and then, were the party found guilty, those witnesses struck the first blows of execution. Had they knowingly testified to untruth, they themselves became murderers before God (Deuteronomy 17:6, 7). Were it determined that one

had offered false witness, he would receive the same penalty that would have been executed against the accused (Deuteronomy 19:16-20). A man's witness, his testimony then, was nothing superficial. It meant a great deal, and involved life and death.

First Corinthians 1:6 tells how God was at work in the Corinthian church through spiritual gifts. This was the testimony of Christ confirmed in them. In 2 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul speaks of those who will be in the kingdom "because our testimony among you was believed." Your testimony may not be a matter of life and death in civil matters, but it is in spiritual ones!

Frequently we find together the "word of God" and "testimony" (Revelation 1:2, 9; 6:9, etc.). And, of course, we have in Revelation 12:10, 11 the remarkable statement that Satan's accusations against believers are overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. What is the effect of Christ's blood? He washes us from our own sins in it (Revelation 1:5). So, you have testimony by those who are gaining the victory over sin.

Some see giving one's testimony as a pseudo-magical opportunity for another to "accept" Jesus once and for all as his personal Savior. One's experience is recounted couched in a popular description of how one is "saved," and the listener is offered opportunity to "accept" Christ. But how might a Seventh-day Adventist present the matter?

In giving your testimony, you are telling what God has done and is doing for you. You consider how most effectively and authentically you can tell your life's story to its current place, and show God's working. Because our view of salvation is based on a Bible-position rather than a traditional one, the Seventh-day Adventist's personal testimony differs in some respects.

Now then. Hear the story of one man.

## Personal Testimony of Larry Kirkpatrick

### Alone in the World

I was born in December, 1962. Atmospheric nuclear testing had reached its peak. Like everyone in this sanctuary today, my bones and teeth are contaminated by radioactive strontium-90. The entire planet is contaminated with it; it is universally present. Its in your teeth, its in your garden. Children of the early 1960s received the highest exposure. You can go to the health food store and buy only premium, certified organic produce. It is there too.

All of us are part of a damaged race. Humanity may be getting better and better through evolution as they say, although, if that is the case, I wonder why the 20th century has been the most deadly in history. According to numbers offered by Dr. Rudolph Rummel, University of Hawaii, *other* than combat or natural deaths, 262 million died in the past century—an average of some 10,000 a day. That is equivalent to the population of Boundary County, Idaho. We think we live in a peaceful time. Think again. We think humanity is getting better and better. Think again.

The Christian knows that our race has been in decline for some 6,000 years. The evidence agrees. We have been decreasing in physical strength, in mental power, and in moral vitality. A man's word used to be his bond. Today, men are weak and wobbly, and seem hardly able to keep a simple commitment. I am not talking about other people. I am talking about myself, and, unless I miss my guess, the description includes you too. We are products of a world bent by sin.

Other generations were shaped by hard work, felling logs, splitting wood. Today, our children go to a state school, learn an insipid, watered-down history, and then come home and play computer games. Forgive me. But I was not much different.

I grew up in the suburbs of Milwaukie, Oregon. My dad worked at a gas station, and, taking night classes, and was able to become a welder. We had a small house behind the drive-in theater. In the late afternoon my friends and I would trespass into the back of the theater lot and turn up the speakers, and at night we sat in lawn chairs on the roof of the house watching movies. No wonder my generation, and myself as well, lacked clarity of purpose. I grew up absorbing values that were not my own. I was not an Adventist, did not go to church. I lived in a contaminated world. Morally, this was my food.

Somehow, I avoided many of the trademark destructive behaviors of my generation. But not all. Like every fallen human being in every generation, I developed many of them. I became expert at sinning.

### God's Image Still On the Coin

But we need to remember. God made man in His image. Me too; and you too. He gives us intellect, an ability to discern, capacity to feel, a conscience, and a will. Adolph Hitler received all these. So did Larry Kirkpatrick.

Along the pathway to adulthood, I made serious mistakes. But something I would read years later tells, not what you might have seen in me then, but what God saw:

Every soul, however degraded by sin, is in God's sight accounted precious. As the coin bears the image and superscription of the reigning power, so man at his creation bore the image and superscription of God; and though now marred and dim through the influence of sin, the traces of this inscription remain upon every soul. God desires to recover that soul and to retrace upon it His own image in righteousness and holiness (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 194).

That is what God desires to do. But He will not unless we consent. Just as we cannot be overcome by Satan without our consent, we cannot be recovered by Christ without our consent.

This is what God is seeking in us: A willingness to be made willing, a consent to try something better, a growth in breadth of character so that we are willing to consider His different pathway. He will never force us. But He urgently desires to bring us to the place where we at last can poke our head upwards from the grime and filth, and realize that there is a whole bright blue sky above; a whole world, an adventure, the possibility of being changed from the caricatures that we are, and becoming truly human people.

### Events and Interventions

God works in our lives. We are all still here; none of us deceased. Early one morning while it was still completely dark, I was driving to work on 82nd Avenue at a very high rate of speed, faster than human reaction time and headlight illumination distance could compensate for. Suddenly, directly in front of me, a van! No lights on, stopped dead in the center of my lane. Impossibly, my car spun round and round and slid past on the left side. No fatalities; no bent metal; no injuries or tickets. But a young man was convinced that an intelligence outside of himself had intervened.

Years later, I do not recall how, I read my first piece of Seventh-day Adventist Christian literature, although I did not know that at the time. It was called “Death in the Kitchen,” and published by something called Amazing Facts. Ham and cheese sandwiches had been a staple in my diet. I could also eat a whole box of glazed donuts in one sitting, or most of a multi-pound bag of M&Ms. At 5’ 7” I weighed in at 197 pounds. I cut all the pork (that I knew was pork) out of my diet. That was a start.

Then, a year later, something else happened: Deaths. My aunt and uncle had always wanted a child. Now she was pregnant with Samuel! But he had died at birth.

Why would a good God allow that? The kid was innocent.

About the very same time, a friend of mine from high school, Jay, who had been one of my guitar students (I had 30 weekly guitar students then), developed Leukemia. He called me from the hospital in Seattle. I said I would come see him. I didn't. Jay died of Leukemia at the age of 21. He had been a good kid. He was not out doing drugs, shoplifting record albums, or burning down the high school bleachers as my other friends.

Why would God allow that?

About this time also I was working for a company that filled orders and loaded supplies into bins that went onto trucks for delivery. I worked from 11 p.m. to morning, often pulling 12+ hour shifts. On off days I would keep the same schedule, staying up all night and walking through the graveyards of Oregon City in the morning, reading the headstones. Thinking. Processing.

### Larry Judges God?

I was searching. I could not make sense of it. Somehow, I knew that if God was for real, that I would find Him in the Bible. One morning, walking through the graveyard, I was angry and I resolved that I would know the truth one way or another. And I prayed a prayer to God—a God who was unknown to me. My prayer was on this line:

God, I don't know if You truly exist, but if You do, I know that I will find You in the Bible. Why are You letting these innocent people die? What kind of God are You! I am going to be fair to You. I am going to read Your whole Bible. I am going to read it through. I will pray, and ask You for help. And then, when I have read it all, I am going to judge You. In Jesus' name, amen.

This is not the proper way to approach God. Don't do it this way! I am sure that He gently smiled, and said to Himself, "I've got you right where I want you!" God does not create the evil that is in our world; nor does He cooperate with Satan in any way. But how He manages to turn evil to good is an amazing testimony to how much He loves us. He works with us, He fine-tunes harsh circumstances so that if we are willing we are led to His light.

All my life I had run, erratically, on my own pathway. God was chasing, and He meant business. Of His desire to save, the Bible says, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). So much in motion, so rarely still, prayerful, reflective—rarely are we able to hear His voice with clarity. Always running on empty, we seek escape from ourselves. Our own shadow seems to be gaining on us! Hear the divinely-given description of our lonely journeys:

Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known (Romans 3:13-17).

So we run. But there is another side to this. Remember, the image on the coin is marred or obscured, but not erased; not yet. That is Satan's mission. He can't do it himself but expertly enlists us in our own destruction. So, we have been erasing the image on the coin. But Here comes God with the polisher! And there is still something that can be polished. There is another part of the human story.

Yes, we are universally damaged, contaminated by much worse than strontium-90. But God's Word tells us that even those who are evil desire to give good gifts to their children (Luke

11:13). And John 1:9, that Jesus is the light who lights every man that comes into the world. Every man. Jesus is at work to save every human being who is willing to be changed.

So I begin to read through the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans. But something is happening. My anger is abating. By the middle of Romans, I understood. It was not me judging God; it was God judging me. I was the evil one, I was the sinner.

I needed Christ.

I knelt alone on my bed in my basement studio apartment in Oregon City, and told God that I needed Him, that I was guilty of sin, and that I accepted Jesus as my Savior. Yes, it was an emotional moment, and my tears were real. Not of sorrow, but of joy! Old things were passed away, all things were become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The adventure was beginning!

### Finding Jesus' Church

With Jesus on my side, I continued to read the Bible through. Now there was a new problem: I needed to find a church. A man who stands alone makes a very small package. God was real, therefore He must actually have a people who were His followers.

I would find them. Rather, God would show me where they were!

Searching, I began to watch television on Sunday mornings. You have to start somewhere. The first program I watched impressed me, but in the wrong way. They pled urgently for a donation of only \$220.00. The next was much more modest, asking only a donation of \$120.00 dollars! But there was another program. This one was straightforward. It offered only a man, standing in earnest, preaching from the Bible. At the end of his program he

did not ask for money but offered to send free booklets. The program was called Amazing Facts and the speaker was Joe Crews.

About this time I began researching in the library. I read from the *Handbook of Denominations*, and reviewed Mormon and other materials. I visited my grandmother. She was a sabbath-keeper, but never became a Seventh-day Adventist. I told her that I was narrowing my search more and more to the Baptists or the Seventh-day Adventists.

Did she have any books from the Seventh-day Adventists? Rooting through her closet, she pulled out a paperback called the *Cosmic Conflict*. It was actually the book *The Great Controversy*. I took it home and began to read.

At the same time, Joe Crews was presenting topics on Sabbath versus Sunday and the Bible-teaching about what happens when a person dies. The Scripture answers were convincing. I wrote a letter to Joe Crews asking for one or two of the little booklets, explaining that I wanted them all but that I could not afford them at that time. In short order a bulging package arrived in the mail from Amazing Facts. It included a two page personal response from Joe, and a copy of every book and booklet then offered by Amazing Facts! I continued to study and read.

### Led to the Doorway

Things were becoming serious now, and I was trying to visit the different churches and speak with their ministers. I usually went to them on Mondays but never found anyone in. So I sought out the Adventists, and on a Tuesday morning I found the Gladstone Park Seventh-day Adventist Church. I walked to the door and stood in silence. Will I find answers here? I thought. A short prayer, then, I knocked. Someone was coming! Alfred opened the door and invited me in.

Walking in, I sat down across from the secretary's desk, and announced, "Hi. I want to learn more about the Seventh-day Adventists."

It was obvious that this didn't happen there every day. We had an interesting conversation. The pastor was out visiting, so they tried to give me some literature. They brought me a copy of *The Great Controversy*. "No, thank you," I said, "give that to someone else. I have nearly finished reading that book. It is excellent!" "Wait, wait!" Alfred said, and returned a few moments later with a book I had never seen before. It was called *The Desire of Ages*. I took it.

So I am reading this book and I am 120 pages in and I go to visit my uncle, a former American Baptist minister. He warns me to stay away from the Adventists who have this spooky prophetic. But what he said did not match what I was reading—the most beautiful things I had ever read about Jesus beside the Bible.

I went to my first prayer meeting at the church. At the end, this kindly lady quoted something from a little book. After the meeting, I asked and she told me that it was called *Early Writings*, and that it was by Ellen G. White. The pastor's wife was present, and suggested that I not concern myself with reading that book right then. This made me curious, and the kindly woman said that I could get my own copy at something called an ABC. I found the ABC in the Yellow Pages, and walked in. I was confronted with almost a whole wall full of books—all written by Ellen G. White. That was a surprise. Then I found *Early Writings*. They wanted \$12.00! That was difficult for me then, but I bought it. I took it home and began to read.

When I came to prayer meeting the next week, I told her afterward that I had bought a copy of *Early Writings*, and that it was a very interesting book, "in certain respects, much like *The Great Controversy*." The pastor's wife looked both worried and relieved.

I should share my reaction to the music in the church. I had been involved in local rock bands as a guitar player; hymns were alien to me. But by this time I was studying the Bible with Pastor Zull, and I had made one or two acquaintances in the church, and it was evident to me that many of these people knew Jesus. So I began to sing along with everyone else. The music bored me, but I began to pay closer attention to the lyrics. And something new and special was added to my life: A music that led my heart toward heaven rather than away.

At the church I met others who were also seeking to follow Jesus and grow in understanding what the Bible taught. In fact, a whole new family of friends was added to my life. For the first time I was a free man. I began to learn things about history that I was never taught in the government-run schools. All this time, I was studying the Bible and reading it through. On a glorious Spring day about easter time, 1989, I was baptized. I finished reading the Bible through (my first time) on the day that I was baptized.

Jesus!

What has knowing Jesus and His Present Truth meant to me? I found out that God sees me as valuable; that He is not looking for excuses to destroy me, but that He is seeking by every appropriate means to save me. He is cleansing the marred, dimmed image and seeking to restore me, to make me whole as I have never been whole before. He takes a deep interest in my curled-up life and is helping me stretch out into new territory. Jesus is always showing me something new and always inviting me to come along with Him. Yes, I'm learning a great deal from the Bible, but this is not about piling head-knowledge upon head knowledge. My walk with Jesus involves all of me: my intellect, my emotions, my discernment, my will. I have not followed at

every step as quickly as I ought, but when I take the step forward, I always find that He was more than worthy of my trust. I have gained an elder Brother, a Friend, and a Savior!

I have gained a friendly communing with the Holy Spirit and my heavenly Father. I am learning how to live so that I can become truly human. God is not taking cartoons to heaven. He seeks not the worship of robots. He makes deep people, and with my own baby-steps, I am following His lead as He guides me.

What have I gained? So many things. I have a basic framework upon which I can understand the progress of prophetic fulfillment; I have learned more how to get outside my own little world and to help others grow spiritually. By means of God's grace, I have self-control over my thought-life, and victory over sin. Things that many longingly desire, but never know, I experience daily. I walk with Jesus. God has a unique place in His universe just for me and a unique place just for you.

Has my faith impacted the communities where I have lived? Oh yes! I watch for divine-appointments, opportunities, without forcing my faith upon others, to help them begin to discover spiritual realities new to them. I seek to live the life of a model Christian so that others can gain something of an appreciation for the kingdom of God. I have been glad to help in my community with health outreaches, Bible studies, and other friendly community meetings.

I view others, even the roughest, as unspeakably valuable persons—like myself, coins still bearing the divine image, marred, obscured, wearing away, but not beyond God's reach! He will recover them; He will bring them home for the first time, if they will just be willing to become willing.

## Conclusion

My purpose in telling my story has not been to lift myself up. Nothing good in my story would have been possible without God's intervention. Today, I don't have any claims of righteousness to make. God is not saving me because I am good, or because I am working my way into His kingdom through a legal doorway of some kind; not at all. I share today that the kingdom has come near to you. God wants a part in your life, but He is a Gentleman. He will not force Himself upon you.

He will give you true liberty if you look and live. Jesus on the cross of Calvary, and Jesus in His intercessory ministry for us above, is our hope. I am like you. I am just another beggar who knows where to find the bread. And O what bread! Jesus is the Bread of my life.

If I have described to you something today that you have not experienced, or that you desire more of, I am going to invite you to talk to God about it; right here; right now. I'll get you started, then give you a few moments of silence to talk things out with Him, and finally close with a short prayer. And I want you to know that one of the highlights of my experience as a Christian this week has been to tell you as I just have, what Jesus has done and is doing for me.

**Biographical note:** Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.