

Workshop: LIGHT & SALT, Grace & Truth

Introduction

Is your faith in Jesus precious to you? Is it the most important thing in your life?

Do you wish everyone would come to believe in Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour?

Do you wish everyone would experience the love, peace, hope and joy that Jesus gives?

Even if your answer is “Yes” to all these questions, it doesn't mean you find it easy to share your faith with others whether family, friends, neighbors, colleagues or strangers. I'm sure all of us want to witness but we may feel timid or discouraged by responses we've received, e.g. polite but not really interested or maybe even negative. What holds you back or makes it difficult for you to witness? ... Do you struggle, not knowing how or where to start? Perhaps you feel daunted because you're afraid someone might ask a question that you can't answer.

Of course, these inhibitions and barriers don't change the fact: Jesus has instructed all his followers – each and every one of us – to share the gospel with unbelievers. Whatever reason is holding us back, it's not really an excuse. Where does the Bible give this instruction?

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8, NIV)

Along with the command comes an amazing promise. Jesus gave each of us God's powerful Spirit who enables us to be Christ's witness. Besides having the Holy Spirit how do we prepare to witness? I realize that's why we've all come to this workshop. Hopefully this means we're all here because we've purposed in our heart to show and tell others about Jesus. Can you suggest some things that can help us be prepared for witness? Prayer, fasting, obedience ... Bible reading, study, memorization are good ways to prepare us to share our faith. We can also read books explaining how to answer common questions unbelievers ask.

Of course, perfection is not a requirement for witness which is vividly illustrated in the familiar story of Jonah. Have you had opportunities to share your faith, maybe even, opportunities you didn't realize until later or didn't act on?

Some local examples: One woman in London saw an opportunity in June right in the middle of lockdown. The Holy Spirit ignited in Jane the idea of how to bring kindness and friendship to some of the 20,000 international students in London who've come to study at Fanshawe or UWO. She consulted with a couple who are involved in campus ministry.

They resonated with her, and together, came up with a strategy for giving out care packages to foreign students. As a result volunteers packed and distributed care packages consisting of a variety of items to the 100 students who had already signed up as recipients online. Each volunteer agreed to be a channel of God's love to these, often lonely, young people, with the goal of forming an ongoing connection that could lead to sharing the gospel. Showing interest and concern, being a good listener, offering to assist with learning English, other kinds of practical help – all these things were encouraged.

As it happened, one of the students I met had a need for some furniture and the Lord provided a way to meet that need. Mary who also attends CGCC delivered a care package to a young Vietnamese woman and has since been able to form a friendship, meeting her on four subsequent occasions. Another volunteer named Marina was assigned a college student who it turned out was also Vietnamese. He was so deeply touched by the care package that he responded positively when Marina offered to pray for him. This was a new experience for Marina, herself, having never before prayed for a stranger in such circumstances. She was nervous but still obeyed the Spirit's prompting. We will see, as the workshop proceeds, how each of these stories unfold in terms of a deepening witness.

As we begin there is something important we must understand. Do you know the phrase in the gospel of John describing Jesus as “full of grace and truth”? (John 1:18) What is your understanding of the need for BOTH grace and truth? Actually, these two ideas summarize nicely what the care package distribution initiative is all about. **Grace and truth** correlate beautifully with “light and salvation” as found in Isaiah 49:6 where God says of the Messiah: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

Let's look at three other Scriptures that expand on the theme of light. In Isaiah chapter 58 God rebukes the hypocrisy of the Israelites: You do as you please when you fast ...

“You ... exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your **light** will break forth like the **dawn**, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your **light** will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the **noonday**. (NIV)

Just as Isaiah rebuked God's people against **quarreling** so Paul admonished the church in Philippians 2:13-14, (NIV);

“Do everything without **grumbling or arguing**, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will **shine among them like stars** in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.

Jesus also makes it clear to his followers, they must shine light through their behaviour. Matthew 5:16, let your **light shine** before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (NIV)

“When unbelievers see our good deeds does this prompt them to give glory to God?” If so, how?

Try to think of an illustration from your own life to help formulate an answer. I recently witnessed a remarkable example while visiting a close friend, Kevin, who is a deeply committed Christian. His non-Christian neighbor dropped by unexpectedly for a visit and said something that I've never forgotten, “This is my favourite Christian neighbor.” I wondered to myself, what on earth Kevin could have done to deserve this remarkable accolade. When I asked, “What made your neighbor say that?” he struggled to find an answer. Eventually, his wife recalled an occasion when they gave their neighbor a home baked pie at Christmas. The bottom line, however, must have been that the neighbor was impressed at seeing how Kevin was raising a happy, peaceful, well disciplined family who regularly attended church and were deeply involved in reaching out to needy people. Undoubtedly, their neighbor realized Kevin's compassion toward the poor was nothing less than an outworking of his love for God. As it is

written, “He who oppresses the **poor** shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the **needy honors God.**” (Proverbs 14:31, NIV)

Is it enough to earn a good reputation by living an attractive life and never mention God or Jesus? We must also shine the light by preaching the message of Jesus. This is very clear in Acts 13:46-47 where Paul and Barnabas preached to the Jews in Antioch, Asia Minor. But when they turned against him, he boldly said: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a **light** for the Gentiles, that you may **bring salvation** to the ends of the earth.”” (NIV) Earlier we saw Isaiah using these exact words with reference to the Messiah, but then Jesus passed the baton to his followers, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ’” (John 20:21, NIV) As messengers and ambassadors of Christ, we're called to bring true **light and salvation** to the ends of the earth.

Clearly Paul uses the term **light** almost synonymously with verbally proclaiming **salvation** through Jesus Christ. The expression “shed light” means to illuminate something as in Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a **lamp** to my feet and a **light** to my path.” Also God's word enhances understanding: “The unfolding of your words gives **light**, it gives understanding...” (Psalm 119:130, NIV)

So let me ask, “What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “preach the gospel”? Typically we think of an evangelist like Billy Graham or Barry Moore preaching before a large crowd. However, preaching does not necessarily mean speaking to a large audience. The word “preach” in Acts 8:4 has to do with ordinary Christians engaging in normal, every-day conversation with their neighbors. Here's the back-story. Shortly after Stephen was martyred a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem causing thousands of believers to flee into the neighboring provinces of Judea and Samaria. These were the very places where Jesus had earlier instructed them, “go and be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria.” Interestingly, all of the trained apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

So, those who went out and “preached” in these two provinces were “ordinary” believers. I'm convinced that these 'untrained' believers were not unlike the new believer we read about in Mark 5:20. Having just been released from bondage to demons, he asked the Lord if he could come along with him. But Jesus told him, “go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been.” So the man started off to visit the Ten Towns of that region and began to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed at what he told them.” (NLT) Just as this man who Jesus delivered, shared with people the wonderful things God had done for him, so also the believers who fled from Jerusalem told their new neighbors, what great things God had done for them.

Notice, a painful crisis impacted the church in the first century, so also we have been struck by a heavy blow in the 21st century pandemic. On hindsight we can see how God sovereignly used the painful persecution to accomplish his good purposes. How do you think God is working things out in our day for the good of his people and the salvation of the world? Perhaps God has allowed painful experiences in your life. How can they lead to witness?

Opening doors to testify

Earlier we raised a concern that Christians often struggle with: how to start a spiritual conversation. Let's consider the man in Mark 5 who was delivered from demons. The miraculous transformation he experienced afforded him an opportunity to share his story. It was natural that he should explain to curious family and neighbors how Jesus freed him and healed him. But what if someone feels inadequate or inferior because his/her story is not so dramatic as the man delivered from demons?

At one time or other we all wrestle with various troubles and anxieties. I've had stressful experiences that made me very worried. So when my friend, Ahmed, shared how deeply anxious and even panicked

he felt, when he faced difficult assignments and tests in college, I was able to recall similar moments in my life, knowing he could resonate with me. Also, I was able to share a simple insight Jesus taught which has helped me to face various kinds of worries. The key thing is not, “How dramatic or sudden was my transformation,” but rather, “How could I relate to and empathize with Ahmed?”

I was able to share some of my struggles along with practical wisdom from Jesus relating to anxiety which has helped me. I showed him Matthew 6:25 where Jesus taught; “...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Have you had contact with any unbelievers who are depressed, worried, fearful, lonely, etc, because of the pandemic? How could you relate to them and find this an open door to share about Jesus?

We are presently facing many troubles like the ongoing pandemic, the resulting economic recession and deep anxieties arising from reopening schools but as Christians we are not to grumble and complain, nor are we to fear. We have peace that passes understanding as Jesus promised in John 16:31; “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” In fact, we have reason to hope.

Recently, I went grocery shopping. While paying the cashier, I handed him a short article, saying with a smile, “Here's a few thoughts that give a positive perspective on the pandemic. I think you'll like it.” He glanced at the first line, “The Corona pandemic has shaken the world. Could it be a *Wake-up call*?” He smiled and said, “Thanks a lot.”

“But,” you may ask, “How does a wake-up call imply a positive, hopeful perspective?” Think of what happens when you wake up in the morning. **Sunrise!** As believers in Jesus, we know that **sunrise** signals the dawning of a promising new day according to the prophets. Malachi said the Messiah is “the **Sun** of Righteousness (who) will rise with healing in his wings.” Similarly, Zechariah described Christ as “the **rising sun** from heaven” and Jesus called himself “the bright **Morning Star**.” (Malachi 4:2; NLT, Luke 1:78; Revelation 22:16, bold added) Ultimately, of course, Jesus is the **light** of the world which raises an interesting question; “Why did Jesus say to us as his followers, 'YOU are the light of the world?’” ...

In closing let me ask a thought provoking question to take home and prayerfully ponder. “Considering how Jesus performed so many kinds of good deeds, most notably, miraculous healings and exorcisms, why was it so important to keep reaching out to towns that had not heard the truth? (Compare Mark 1:38; 6:34; Luke 10:1ff)

Conclusion: God opens even small doors to shine the light

In closing let me encourage you to be prayerful and watchful, looking for opportunities to share the gospel with neighbors, not overlooking small ways to shine the light, even with a stranger, “If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones.” (Luke 16:10, NLT)

Let me share how God answered my prayer to open a door of witness during the 'lockdown'. I was in a reception room waiting for the mechanic to swap-out my winter tires. There beside me was a newspaper on the coffee table, so I read the editorial, titled, “Ways to Look (on the) Bright Side.” Another customer was waiting for his car six feet away from me who looked rather bored, so I commented, “This editor sure knows what makes for a relevant read! She has some interesting thoughts on how to look on the bright side of this crisis.”

The man's ears perked up as he listened to me explain some “bright” ideas I had been thinking about, “There's been considerable interest pertaining to how sunlight, especially UV-C rays, have proved very useful in removing coronavirus from various surfaces such as face masks and cell phones.” I also told him that some researchers are even suggesting sunlight can destroy coronavirus. After a five minute lull in our conversation he was called up to pay and collect his keys. Then he walked out.

My conscience was troubled knowing that somehow I'd missed a perfect opportunity to share a relevant article, “Wake-up call” which gives a positive perspective on the pandemic and also shares a glimpse of the gospel. Moments later, while I was moaning inwardly and regretting my failure to seize a perfect opportunity, the door opens and in walks the same guy looking for something he had left. God's Spirit prompted me inaudibly, yet clearly, “What better opportunity are you waiting for? ... When do you think you're going to see this guy again?”

I thanked the Lord for giving me another chance. I plucked up courage and walked over to the young man, saying, “I wrote some thoughts about looking on the bright side of the pandemic. I thought you might like to see them.” He gladly accepted it.

This guy happened to be from an ethnic minority, but of course, this is all the more reason why I should share the hope and light of Jesus. Moreover, the imagery of light appeals to people across a wide range of world-views whether, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yezidism, humanism, animism, agnosticism or wicca, etc. As it is written, “Light is sweet; how pleasant to see a new day dawning.” (Ecclesiastes 11:7, NLT)

Sowing and watering

You may recall Mary took a care package to a Vietnamese college student. On her second visit she shared a Bible verse saying that God has planted eternity in the human heart. A wide door has opened to share other Scriptures, notably the gospel of John, which the student is eagerly reading. These readings have stimulated many questions and meaningful conversations. As it is written, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.” (Psalm 119:130, NIV)

What's the follow up plan?

1) I want to encourage you to further explore the “light of the gospel” by reading several relevant articles:

Wake-up call: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/wakeup_call.html

Meditation on Light: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/meditation_light.html

Following the star: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/following_star.html

Bringing Hope to Light: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/hope_to_light.html

Looking on the Bright Side: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/bright_side.html

Userguide to sharing the Gospel using the 'Sunrise' pamphlet:

https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/userguide_sunrise.html

Lighting up the Darkness: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/lighting_darkness.html

2) I plan to hold a follow-up workshop delving further into the themes of light and salt, especially what it means to “season our conversation with salt.” (Colossians 4:2-6) We will also examine how to share our own personal story recounting our journey to Jesus.