

## **Pro Football Was My God Psalm 71**

Until a half-naked man showed up at my locker

When we tell other people about what God has done for us, we are sharing our testimony. A testimony is when you share your story of how you came to faith. Its also can be a story about how Kingdom of God values influenced your daily decisions. So every Christian has a testimony, a story, in fact many stories.

Some Christians have dramatic testimonies where they tell of being delivered from a life of drug addiction or crime or some sordid deeds. Some followers of Jesus have amazing stories of rescue from danger. Other Christians don't have testimonies that are as dramatic - but they are just as significant. Why? Because it's about the work of Jesus in this world, the Holy Spirit reaching out to each of us, and how God is building his Kingdom.

It's good to hear how people came to Christ, but we don't need to hear all the gory details about their past. There are testimonies where people tell how much they have given up for Jesus. They'll say things like, "I gave up this and that for Jesus. I have made such sacrifices for the Lord. I have done it all for Him!"

But testimonies are not about what we gave up to follow Jesus. It's about what He gave up for us. Generally we don't share what we have done for Jesus. We share what Jesus has done for us. Jesus is the one who has done the work. It is Jesus whom we are proclaiming.

A good, strong testimony will lift up what Christ has accomplished. The fact of the matter is that all of us were sinners hopelessly separated from God, traveling in the same boat on our way to hell; and the same gospel came and transformed us. That is the testimony we all have. Testimonies are about transformation. God's work in us – not just about conversion.

This is another look at testimony, witnessing, verbally sharing. Again, the full story from

Christianity Today magazine in on the bulletin board in the education wing. The sub-title of this story is attention getting. Pro Football Was My God - Until a half-naked man showed up at my locker.

Derwin Gray begins: Growing up on the west side of San Antonio, I believed in god—the god of football. The game was my ticket out of an early life saturated with violence, abuse, addiction, and chaos.

I was raised by my grandmother, (who was a Jehovah's Witness,) because my parents were only teenagers when I was born. We were not poor. We were "po." We couldn't afford the other *o* and *r*. By the time I was 13, I looked at my environment and told my grandmother, "I'm going to do something with my life." Football was my way out of the hell I was living in. I believed it would lift me into the heaven of the American dream.

Football functioned as my savior. It gave me love: If I played well, I was loved by fans. It gave me an identity: I was Derwin, the football player. It gave me significance: I was some body because I was a great player. And football gave me a mission. My mission was this: *Derwin, you can go to college and make something of your life.*

During my sophomore year of high school, I started to do just that. I transferred to Judson High School in Converse, a suburb of San Antonio, where I played for a Texas High School Hall of Fame coach. My senior year, I accepted a football scholarship to Brigham Young University (BYU), where I had to take classes study the Book of Mormon.

On January 15, 1990, during my freshman year at BYU, I met a beautiful young lady. . We fell in love fast and married on May 23, 1992, during my senior year. The first wedding I had ever attended was my own.

At BYU, my god had come through for me. I had an outstanding career and later was named

to BYU football's "All Time Dream Team." Plus, I was loved at the school. I had the girl of my dreams. I was making something out of my life. Then in 1993, I was drafted by the Indianapolis Colts to strong safety. I had made it!

Then I met the Naked Preacher, a linebacker for the Colts. It was impossible not to notice a linebacker who would take a shower, dry off, wrap a towel around his waist, pick up his Bible, and ask those of us in the locker room, "Do you know Jesus?" I would think, Do you know you are half-naked? I asked the veterans on the team about him. They said, "Don't pay attention to him. That's the Naked Preacher."

At this point in my life, I did not want anything to do with Jesus or a half-naked man talking about him, so I tried to avoid him. One day after practice, I was sitting at my locker and saw the Naked Preacher (whose real name is Steve Grant) walking toward me. "Rookie D. Gray, do you know Jesus?" he asked.

I pretended to not hear him and turned my back. He repeated the question, but this time he was at my locker. Even though I was not a churchgoer or involved in any religious group, I gave what I thought was a very religious answer: "I'm a good person."

I explained to Steve that I was one of the only men in my family who had not been to jail, who did not have a substance abuse problem, who had graduated from high school & college & did not have a child outside of marriage.

The Naked Preacher opened up his Bible and shared two verses with me: "And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone'" (Mark 10:18, ESV); and, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Steve explained that according to the Bible, only God is good; he is the standard of goodness & righteousness. Everyone else has sinned & falls short. This disturbed me. I said,

"Naked man, you are telling me that my moral comparison is to God & not to other people?"

Steve the naked preacher said, "Yes."

"God is perfect! What can I do to be perfect?"

Steve answered, "Nothing."

I said, "I'm in big trouble."

"Rookie D. Gray," the half naked preacher said, "now you are starting to get it. You can't do anything to reach a perfect God. But Jesus has done everything for the perfect God to come down and reach you."

Derwin continues: I sat in silence. I needed time to think through what he was saying and what I was experiencing in my heart.

Over the next five years, I watched Steve live out the gospel. When my teammates needed advice, they were at the Naked Preacher's locker. Steve was involved in the greater Indianapolis community. He displayed Jesus in the way he loved his wife and children. He preached through his words and actions.

As the Naked Preacher preached, God's love crushed me. I had achieved the American dream, only to realize it could not empower me to love my wife or forgive my father. My fame and money could not erase my sin, shame, guilt, fear, and insecurity.

Then, between 1995 and 1997, I started getting injured on the field. When an athlete's body starts to fail, they know their career is coming to an end. I was letting my god—football—down. I was unable to serve it. My body was how I made my living. As it began to give out, I was stripped of everything I thought gave me meaning. I was left with nothing, even though I seemingly had everything.

On August 2, 1997, after lunch at training camp for my fifth season with the Indianapolis Colts, I walked to my dorm room at Anderson

University in Indiana. As I walked, I sensed an emptiness and brokenness like I had never experienced. When I got to my room, I immediately picked up the phone and called my wife. "I want to be more committed to you," I said. "And I want to be committed to Jesus."

At that moment I realized that God loved me. Not because I could run fast or jump high or because I was good, or even for what I could give him. I realized that as Jesus hung on the cross, I was forever loved & accepted by God. I realized my sin had been erased by Jesus' blood. It was as if I could see for the first time. That day I got infected with a virus called grace. The symptoms are now full-blown.

In the fall of 1999, I retired from the NFL. I began to travel to youth events and churches to speak about God's love. This itself was a miracle, not only because of my background but also because from an early age I had been a compulsive stutterer. All my wife and I knew was that Jesus loved us and that if he could transform my life, he could transform anyone's. So I took every invitation I received to share my testimony.

Eventually Jesus gave me a love for his bride, the church. My wife and I sensed deeply that we were being called to plant a church that reflects the diversity of the eternal kingdom and the New Testament churches of the first century (Rev. 5:9–12; Eph. 2:14–22).

On February 7, 2010, alongside many faith-energized, love-filled people, we launched Transformation Church, a multiethnic, multigenerational, missional church in Indian Land, South Carolina. This is Derwin's story of grace, one that Jesus continues to write to this day.

*Derwin Gray is the author of Limitless Life: You Are More Than Your Past When God Holds Your Future (Thomas Nelson).*

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." A 1:8

"Jesus put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord." Ps 40:3

Testimonies have a power that is not like any other power. When they are focused on what Jesus does for and in people, they change lives. Testimonies are the best type of witness – because the proof is in the life of the teller. They are not just about being rescued, or conversion, but of changed lives that are finding their niche in building God's Kingdom

This world needs stories about and by people who care so deeply about humanity, the planet, our future & are passionate about contributing to a hopeful better world. Our stories, big and small – point people to Jesus, the Savior.

"My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long—though I know not how to relate them all. I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you—I whom you have delivered. My tongue will tell of your righteous acts all day long,