

The Hostile Witnesses

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group meets the two witnesses no grief theory can reach, a persecutor and an unbelieving brother, weighs what each gained and lost, and tests the legend theory at full strength against the dated evidence.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 639 again, now sharpened: the historically verified manifestations include appearances to men who did not want them.

■ What You Need to Know

Every naturalistic theory so far has assumed the witnesses wanted to see Jesus alive. Tonight's two did not. Saul of Tarsus tells us in his own hand what he was: "I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). This is not a biographer's flattery; it is a self-accusation in a public letter, corroborated by Acts and remembered against him for decades ("Is not this the man who made havoc...?", Acts 9:21). Whatever happened near Damascus, it happened to a man whose career, reputation, zeal, and theology all pointed the other way, and it cost him everything he lists in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28: labors, imprisonments, countless beatings, five times the thirty-nine lashes, three times beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, and finally, by the unanimous memory of the early Church, death under Nero. Grief hallucination requires grief; cognitive dissonance requires prior commitment. Saul had neither. His own explanation is 1 Corinthians 15:8: "Last of all... he appeared also to me."

James is quieter and, in his way, stranger. The Gospels record with characteristic embarrassment that during the ministry "even his brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5). Yet within a few years this same James is the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, a "pillar" alongside Cephas and John (Gal 2:9), presiding at the council of Acts 15, and the creed of Session 4 records the hinge in four words: "then he appeared to James" (1 Cor 15:7). His death is reported not by a Christian but by Josephus: the high priest Ananus, in the interval between Roman governors in AD 62, had "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James" and certain others stoned (source card tonight). A hostile family member does not convert to his dead brother's messiahship, lead the movement in the city of the execution, and die for it, because of a mood.

Tonight's steelman is legend, and it deserves an honest, even generous presentation, because legends about Jesus really did grow; we can watch them. The second-century Gospel of Peter narrates the resurrection moment itself: soldiers watch two giant angels walk a giant Jesus out of the tomb, followed by a floating, talking cross. That is what legend looks like when it happens. Now set the canonical accounts beside it: no evangelist narrates the rising at all (CCC 647 makes this the Church's own observation); the witnesses are women; the heroes doubt, flee, and deny; the risen one cooks fish. The restraint of the canonical record, compared against real legendary growth in the same century, is itself evidence. And the dating from Session 4 closes the door: the classicist A. N. Sherwin-White, studying rates of legendary accretion in Greco-Roman sources, argued in substance that even two full generations is too short a span for legend to erase a hard historical core, and the creed leaves no generations at all, let alone two.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

When Paul describes his conversion, he reaches for a prophet's call: God "had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace" (Gal 1:15). Tonight's discovery hunt sends the group to Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," to hear the echo Paul intends: the persecutor understands himself drafted, like Jeremiah, against his own inclinations, into a word he did not choose. It feeds Thread 3: Paul reads his own violent reversal as scripture-shaped.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Clement of Rome • *Letter to the Corinthians (1 Clement) 5, c. AD 96*

Writing from Rome within one generation, Clement holds up "the good apostles": Peter, who after many labors bore his witness and went to his appointed place of glory, and Paul, who taught righteousness to the whole world, reached the limits of the West, and bore his witness before the rulers. The Greek word Clement uses for their deaths, *martyreō*, still meant "to bear witness"; in men like these it was becoming the word for dying rather than unsaying. A close summary of the chapter.

St. John Chrysostom • *In Praise of St. Paul (De Laudibus Sancti Pauli)*

Chrysostom returns throughout his panegyrics to a single wonder: in substance, that the wolf became the shepherd; the man breathing threats carried the name he had hunted to kings and nations, gladly trading honor for chains. For Chrysostom, Paul himself, more than any argument Paul wrote, is the standing proof of the resurrection: only a living Christ, he insists, turns a persecutor into an apostle. A summary in our words.

St. Jerome • *Lives of Illustrious Men (De Viris Illustribus) 2*

Jerome's entry on James, called the Just, gathers the early traditions: the brother of the Lord, first bishop of Jerusalem, who governed the church there for thirty years, a man of such relentless prayer that tradition (from the second-century writer Hegesippus) said his knees grew hard as a camel's, and who was put to death for refusing to deny the one he had once refused to believe. A summary in our words of Jerome's account and the traditions he preserves.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 639:** the historically verified manifestations of the resurrection, now including appearances to the unwilling.
- **CCC 642:** the community of believers is built on the witness of those chosen, "most especially" the apostolic witnesses; Paul insists on his own place in that chain (1 Cor 15:8-11).
- **CCC 647:** no evangelist describes the rising; keep this beside the Gospel of Peter tonight, where a legend does describe it.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Two candidate lines tonight; the wording "attributed the change to seeing him alive" claims exactly what the sources claim and no more.

Thread 3. Jeremiah 1:5 behind Galatians 1:15.

Restraint marker. When the Gospel of Peter's flying cross gets its laugh, and it will, quietly note that the canonical silence about the rising itself (CCC 647) is the sound of testimony, not storytelling. That

contrast is the night's keepsake.

▪ Leading This Study Well

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Paul is your friend's natural ally. A skeptic often identifies with a man who thought the whole thing was dangerous nonsense. Introduce Saul as exactly that and let your friend narrate what it would take to turn him around. Do not answer for him.

Handle martyrdom honestly. He may say, rightly, that people die for false beliefs constantly. Agree at once, then draw the distinction that carries the whole argument: modern martyrs die for what they sincerely believe on others' word; these men died for what they claimed to have seen. Liars make poor martyrs. Sincerity is all the argument claims, and sincerity is all it needs, because sincere witnesses this early rule out legend, and their content ruled out grief.

The Gospel of Peter moment. Read it deadpan. The contrast does the work; commentary would spoil it.

▪ Session Goals

1. The group hears Paul's self-description as persecutor from his own letters and tallies what conversion cost him.
2. The group traces James from unbelief (John 7:5) to leadership (Gal 2:9; Acts 15) to death (Josephus).
3. The group discovers Jeremiah 1:5 behind Galatians 1:15.
4. The legend theory is steelmanned with a real legend on the table, then tested against the dated creed and canonical restraint.
5. Ledger lines proposed.

▪ Time Note

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Jeremiah hunt and Win question 2. Never cut the Josephus card or the Gospel of Peter contrast.

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Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, you are said to have met men who were against you. If you are real, you know how to meet honest resistance; teach us to respect it too. Amen.

▪ Win

1. What is the biggest reversal of conviction you have ever watched in someone you know well? What did it cost them?
2. What would it take to convince you of something you currently oppose with your whole strength? Is there anything that could?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Galatians 1:13-24.

1. Build Saul's profile from his own words: what was he, what was he doing, and how far advanced was he (v. 14)? Why does his testimony about himself carry special weight?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

A rising star of Pharisaic Judaism, advanced beyond his peers, "extremely zealous," who "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." It is confession, not accusation: a man publicly indicting his own past in letters his enemies could exploit. The criterion of embarrassment again, now autobiographical. And note verses 22-23: the Judean churches knew him only by the report, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." The reversal was the headline in his own lifetime.

2. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, Paul's ledger of what the change purchased him. Tally it. What did conversion gain Paul, in worldly terms, and what does that do to any theory that he invented or imagined his experience for advantage?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Labors, prisons, "countless beatings," five scourgings, three beatings with rods, a stoning, three shipwrecks, dangers from every side, hunger, cold, and daily anxiety; tradition adds execution under Nero, attested within one generation by St. Clement of Rome. The advantage theory has nothing to feed on. Deliberate fraud buys him this; hallucination lacks a griever; the man himself says simply, "he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:8). His sincerity is about as well purchased as sincerity can be.

3. Now James. Read John 7:5, then Galatians 2:9 and 1 Corinthians 15:7. Trace the arc in three verses. What happened in the middle?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

"Even his brothers did not believe in him" during the ministry, an admission the Church preserved against its own founder's family. Then: "then he appeared to James." Then: James a "pillar" of the Jerusalem church, its acknowledged head. The creed places the hinge exactly where the grief theories

cannot operate: an unbelieving brother is not longing for his sibling's messianic return; a dead brother is proof the messianic claim failed. Something moved James from the family's skepticism to the movement's leadership, and the earliest record names the something.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 20.200

Non-Christian Jewish historian, writing c. AD 93 about events of AD 62. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain. This passage, unlike the famous Testimonium, is accepted as authentic by virtually all scholars.

"...Ananus... assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned..."

4. What does a non-Christian historian, with no stake in the story, independently confirm here?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

That Jesus existed and was called Christ; that he had a brother named James; that James was prominent enough in Jerusalem for his execution to be a political scandal (Josephus goes on to report that fair-minded citizens protested and the high priest was deposed for it); and that James died by stoning in AD 62 rather than abandon the movement. The unbelieving brother of John 7:5 ends here, and an enemy's pen records it.

5. Discovery hunt: Paul says God "had set me apart before I was born" (Gal 1:15). Hunt the Old Testament for the voice he is echoing. (Try the call of Jeremiah.)

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Paul narrates his reversal in the cadence of a prophet drafted against his will toward the nations. Whatever near Damascus did to him, he could only describe it with the scriptures. Thread 3 grows.

STEELMAN • The Legend Theory, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; strengthen it freely.

READ ALOUD. Stories grow. Decades separate the events from the written Gospels; oral cultures embellish; the miracle-count rises visibly from earlier to later apocryphal writings. We can even produce the specimen: the second-century Gospel of Peter describes the resurrection itself, with soldiers watching two colossal angels escort a Jesus whose head overpasses the heavens out of the tomb, followed by a cross that walks and answers a voice from heaven. If legends like that grew within a century, why not the whole Easter story within a generation? Perhaps a revered teacher's memory, transfigured by devotion, simply accreted an empty tomb here, an appearance there, until history sank beneath the story.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. First, the clock. The creed the group dated in Session 4 is fixed within a handful of years, in Jerusalem, among living hostile eyewitnesses; the classicist A. N. Sherwin-White argued from Greco-Roman parallels that even two generations is too short for legend to displace a historical core, and here there are no generations at all. Second, the fingerprints. Set the Gospel of Peter beside the canonical accounts: real legend narrates the rising in technicolor; the canonical Gospels never narrate it at all, a restraint the Church herself points to (CCC 647). Real legend deletes embarrassments; the canonical record keeps the women, the flight, the denial, the doubt. Third, the direction of correction: the embarrassing details survive every retelling, which is the opposite of how embellishment behaves. The theory predicts fingerprints, and the fingerprints on the record belong to

testimony.

DIG DEEPER

How solid is the tradition that the apostles died for their witness? Be honest about gradations: strongest for Peter and Paul (St. Clement of Rome within one generation; Ignatius; the Neronian persecution context in Tacitus), explicit in Scripture for James the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2), non-Christian for James the Just (tonight's Josephus card), and of varying strength in later tradition for the rest. The argument tonight needs no more than the strong cases, and claims no more. What no source anywhere records is a single witness recanting.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* The movement's two most consequential early converts were an active persecutor and a previously unbelieving member of Jesus's own family.
- *Proposed:* Both attributed the change to seeing him alive; both led the movement publicly in the cities that knew them; both died rather than retract, and no witness anywhere is recorded recanting.

▪ **Send**

1. Saul had every earthly reason to stay Saul. Which theory on our table so far can carry the weight of his reversal? Can any?
2. If you found yourself convinced against your will of something costly, what do you think you would do next?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read Acts 9:1-22 on your own: the same event from the outside. Note what the people around Saul could and could not perceive.
- Think of the most honest opponent of your own views you know. What would their conversion require, and what would it mean to you?

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, you did not wait for Saul to warm to you. Meet each of us with the same initiative, and give us his honesty when we are met. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.
Galatians 1:23 (RSV2CE)

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Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Galatians 1:13-24 • read aloud (Saul's self-portrait; the report in Judea)
- 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 • read aloud (the cost)
- 1 Corinthians 15:7-8 • cited (appeared to James; to Paul)
- John 7:5 • read aloud (his brothers did not believe)
- Galatians 2:9 • cited (James the pillar)
- Acts 9:21; Acts 12:2; Acts 15 • leader background
- Jeremiah 1:5 • discovery hunt (behind Gal 1:15)
- Galatians 1:23 • memory verse
- CCC 639, 642, 647 • doctrine anchors

Source card tonight: Josephus, Antiquities 20.200. Contrast text: Gospel of Peter (second-century apocryphon), summarized in the steelman; it is not Scripture and not printed as a source card.