

My Testimony, Then and Now

by Gisela Yohannan

Gisela Yohannan shares her journey of faith, highlighting God's grace and her commitment to missions and empowering women in ministry.

Duration: 53:40

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Testimony", "Faithfulness in Service"

Description

Gisela Yohannan shares her powerful testimony of God's grace and faithfulness throughout her life, beginning with her childhood in Germany and her struggle to understand salvation. After finally accepting Christ at a youth camp, she dedicated her life to missions, overcoming challenges and societal expectations to follow God's call. Gisela emphasizes the importance of sharing the Gospel and helping others, particularly through her work with women in Asia, where she trains them in faith, literacy, and social development. Her journey reflects the transformative power of faith and the impact of serving others in Christ's name. Gisela's story is a testament to God's unwavering love and the privilege of serving Him.

Transcript

The other day someone will ask me, well, what you going to say, you know, how long does it take you, you know, to say your testimony, you got an hour or so. I said, well, if you are 62 years old, your testimony is getting longer every year. And that is actually true.

You know, every year the Lord is adding new things to our life that we can testify about how good he is and how faithful he is. I thought since Melissa want to know more about me and all, I better start with a Bible verse. I do want rather to talk about the Lord Jesus than I want to talk about myself.

But I want to read this verse in Ephesians 2 verse 8. For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. And that I would like to say about my life. You know, when I was growing up, you know, my life was not so much different from the lives of my family and my relatives and the other people in my village.

But now I look at my life and I look at their life and I'm so amazed, you know, how gracious God was to me. And sometimes when I go back and I made a visit, then I'm thinking this could be me, you know, the lives the people live. It's not anything, you know, bad or anything, but the Lord has given me such a privilege to serve him.

So I want to start with telling you where I come from. I think most of you already figured out by my accent that I must be somewhere from Europe. I am from Germany.

I was born and brought up there. And my parents and my family, they belong to the state church. And so they were religious and they knew some things, but I don't think they would have ever known enough to tell me how to get saved.

I was interested in knowing God, even as a little girl, I always wanted to know about the Lord. And when I was 13, I was allowed to attend a youth camp. And there I heard the gospel and I realized that I was lost and I needed Jesus to save me, but I did not know how to do this.

You know, I didn't know, what do you actually exactly do to get saved? And so I was hoping, you know, maybe someone will come and ask me, do you want to get saved and help me? And at that time I was so shy. I did not have the courage to go to someone. So I waited every day, is someone coming and telling me how to get saved? The youth camp was two weeks and they had altar calls and they had all kinds of things, but I was way too shy for any of it, you know? And so I waited if someone will come and the last day came and I remember, I was so, so sad in my heart.

I had to go home without knowing how I can get saved. Maybe they explained it, but I didn't get it. I needed someone to help me.

And so I would say the year of my life from the age of 13 to 14 was probably the most difficult year of my life. And the reason was that I knew I was lost and I was going to hell and I didn't know how to get saved. Well, the next year in 1964, I was permitted from my parents to attend another youth camp like that.

Now I heard the gospel again and I was so convicted. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. I realized I was absolutely lost and I needed Jesus.

And this time I decided I do not want to go home without Jesus in my heart. So during that youth camp, they had a church service in the local church that was putting on this youth camp. And so during that service, the pastor was preaching and it was like he was reading my life, you know? I was absolutely convicted that I need to have Jesus.

But I still was so shy. I still didn't know what to do. And so during the service, I started to pray, please make this man give an invitation.

And I waited and I hoped that he would give an invitation. And so actually, I wasn't used to that kind of church. Actually, in the end, he was giving an altar call to pastor.

And he was saying, if anyone want to receive Jesus, lift your hand. And I was the first one to lift up my hand. And so after the service, he invited those that raised their hand to come into the prayer room.

And pray. And so I went there and the pastor was there and he asked me and I said, I want to receive Jesus. He said, you can invite him through prayer.

You just need to tell him. I said, I don't know how. So he said, let us kneel down together and I will pray and you repeat after me.

And you mean it in your heart and the Lord will save you. And that's what I did. And I got up and I absolutely knew that the Lord had come into my heart.

Now, the youth camp was still for another few days. And I remember some of me and my friends, we were walking down the road and they were asking me, what will you do when you graduate from high school? And at that moment, I knew in my heart that God called me for missions. I didn't hear a sermon on it.

I didn't hear an altar call. I didn't read scriptures on it or anything like that. But I knew in my heart that this is what God want for my life.

And so that day I decided this will be the only thing I will do with my life. Now, I was saved for a week or so and then I needed to go home and I didn't have all this teaching around me and I couldn't go to such a church either. But I had so many questions, you know, about my new life and what I needed to do and so I would write letters to that pastor that led me to the Lord and will ask him questions.

What should I do and all, and he will write me back. He and his wife would pray for me and he would write me back and whatever he wrote, I obeyed and I was doing. And this is how the Lord helped me to grow.

And then one day I wrote and told him that I believe that God called me for missions. And in his reply, he gave me an advice that was probably the best thing for my life. He was writing and said, if God has called you, you must put God's call first in your life, above everything else, above marriage, above friendship, above job, above money.

And so from that time on, every decision I made, I made in the light of God's call on my life. Now I was only 14 years old, you know, and I had a long ways to go to graduate from school and all this, but what this pastor told me, I kept that in my mind and it determined what I can do and where I can go and to what things I need to do. I need to say no, you know, not that I did everything perfect, I made mistakes, but I kept God's call above everything else.

I remember one of the things, you know, my father, he belonged to a club and this club had all these parties going on and he took my sister and me with him, you know, so we can also participate in all these things and learn to live in society normally. And, you know, in some ways, some things had been fun, but I remember coming home and sitting in my dad's car and I was thinking about that evening and then the Lord spoke to me in my heart and said, you know, if you go to this kind of places, your heart will be divided. Then I said, Lord, I will never go again.

And the same thing, you know, like in school, you have different functions in school and different things students do. And many times I had to be there, but there were a lot of times when I could not participate, when, you know, out of all the students, I'm the only one who will say no and not participate in the things that I knew would draw me away from God's love and the call that he had given in my life. And some of these things were rather difficult to understand for my family and my parents, especially my father.

My father was thinking now I have become fanatic and religious and very much off, you know. But, you know, as, I mean, as I grew, you know, God's call became more and more consuming in my life. God's call would be the first thing I think in the morning when I get up and the last thing when I go to bed at night.

And I would sit in school and my teacher would do, you know, explain math or something. And I will look through a window and think about missions, about the mission field. And I would sit down and I would count the years, how many more years until I can go and serve God.

And I would be thankful for every month, for every day that passed so I could go and serve the Lord. Now, all I knew in Germany was if you join a mission, you have to have home economic training and then after

that you have to have a social profession. I wanted to be in missions but I was not necessarily wanting to do, you know, social work.

But in order to be able to join a mission, you have to be either a doctor, a nurse or something like that. So I decided to do nursing training. Now, by that time I was 17 and then from the time about I was 19 on, I went out for street witnessing and we started a mission team.

And we would go for outreach work and we would go for door to door in different communities, sharing about the Lord. It were, this were the late 60s, early 70s. And there were lots of young people roaming the streets and it was here like that as well.

But the Lord really gripped our heart to share His word and I remember one day I read in my Bible that Jesus said to this man that got delivered from demons, you know, you go home and tell how good I was to you, what God did for you. So in our mission team, I was saying, you know, I read this, I think that means we should go to our own communities where we come from and tell the people. So we decided to start with my village.

So I got all the team together and we came to my village and we went door to door to share Christ with all those that know you. And then since I was not living anymore at home, when I was doing this nursing training, I was in nursing school. I had opportunity to attend a church that was preaching the gospel and I wanted to join that church.

So I told my father, you know, that I wanted to leave the state church and join that church. And he told me, I will never forgive you until my death if you do that. But for me, it was a joy to choose, to choose the Lord and to be with the believers.

Now, my graduation from nursing school came and everybody was advising me, no, you got your degree, you need to work and you should make some money and all that. I said, no, I need to go. God called me for missions and I want to, that's what I want to do.

And then my family was saying, at least you need to take a few months off after all the exams, you'll be so tired and everything. And I told them, I waited so long, I need to go now. So my bags were packed, I graduated in the morning and I left in the evening to join a mission team three days later in Switzerland.

Of course, I was with a few different mission teams and then later on was one of them, I came to India. And like Melissa already said, I met my husband who was working also with a mission there. And later on, we got married and we served the Lord together.

And I thought I will let you know when my father was about 76 years old, he got very sick and he nearly died. I came home and I talked to him and I said, if you would die, do you know if you would be saved? And he was not able to answer that. And I said, do you want to be saved? He said, if God wants me.

I said, he wants you. I said, you can invite him into your heart through prayer. He said, I don't know what to say.

I said, you repeat after me. And so my father at age 76 received Christ. And two years later, he passed away but my mother told me a week before he died, he said to my mother, you know, I love Gisela the most because she helped me to receive Jesus.

Now I know that I can go to heaven. It took many, many years for God to work in his heart but I'm so glad that he did this miracle to speak to him and let him receive the Lord just before he's going into eternity. Now, this is my testimony in short.

And I was thinking, I want to tell you a little bit what I'm doing now since all these things that I told you is quite a long time ago. As you know, my husband started Gospel for Asia and we do church planting work in different parts of Asia like India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and number of other countries. Now, our churches, our brothers are planting churches and in these churches, we have about 309 languages represented.

We have in 9,000 churches and fellowships, we have women's groups. We call them women fellowships. They didn't start when the churches started.

They started much later out of the need we saw for these women to be taught and to be helped to grow in the Lord. So one of the Indian sisters and I traveled for almost two years to set up and train these local women fellowship groups. Now, when I say a local women fellowship group, there will be a leader and a co-leader and several others like a team that will lead this local women's group like you probably have here too.

And we have to train them because most of our people, almost all of our people in our churches come from unreached areas and they are first generation Christians. They don't have any church background at all. So these women in the churches, they are very, very eager to know the Lord more.

And so we have these women fellowship groups that meet every week. And the greatest need for these first generation Christians is to become grounded in the word of God and then to be equipped to serve in the local church and also in missions because the mission field is right next door, is right outside the church. So they need to know how to witness, how to go out and pray for people when they are sick, how to lead someone to Christ, how to pass out gospel tracts, how to share their faith.

And then another great, great need for these women is personal and social development. Now here, you probably don't need so much of that, but over there, people come from often very, very poor and destitute backgrounds. I don't know if you heard about Dalits.

Dalits are the untouchables. You know, in the Hindu caste system, they have the high caste and the middle caste and then the low caste. And under the low caste come the untouchables.

They are the lowest of the low and there are about 300 million of them in India alone. And many, many of our people come from that background. Many live in incredible poverty, in bonded labor.

I'm sure when you watch some of the programs on the TV screen, you see some of this, but they really, really need a lot of help in their personal and social development so they can better their lives for their families as well. So addressing these three main needs, we have a women fellowship program that we have in all of our churches and mission stations where we have believers. Our women come together for weekly Bible study and we have a curriculum there that we write for them and they are teaching that it will be systematic things that they learn a basis for their faith.

Of course, they attend the worship service in the church too, but this is kind of for them, especially geared toward them as ladies. And then we teach them and they are serving also in the local church, how to do that, what they can do to help. And then missions is part of the program.

Prayer for missions, witnessing, compassion ministry, going out, going door to door, and doing many of these type of things in order to share their faith with those that are unreached. And then they do fundraising for missions to raise money to sponsor missionaries, to help with reaching out, and then to pay for their own outreach programs that they do in their women's fellowship. So they make crafts, in some areas they do weaving, they plant gardens and raise vegetables, and then they go to the market and sell them.

Others raise chickens and sell the eggs, the chicken, the eggs that that chicken lays can only be used for the Lord's work, you know. The women fellowship may buy a bunch of little chicks and distribute it to the different sisters, and everything that this chicken produces, the eggs will be sold in the market, and then they buy gospel tracts with them so they can do outreach work. And then they have so many different, we are amazed what our sisters all do to raise money.

Our pastors say these women fellowships, they have more money than the church. And they also, some of the things they do is they fast a day a week, and then they can use the money instead of for buying food. They will give it for missions, to support missions and to finance their outreach.

And then we have classes for them which are separate from the Bible studies. And in these classes, we teach them things that will help improve their life. We teach them basic health and hygiene.

We teach them first aid. We teach them women's health issues. Or what do you do when you are pregnant? What you should do and what you should not do.

There is lots of myths and things around in these villages that would amaze you. And for these women, they can learn how to stay healthy during pregnancy. Then we teach them basic childcare.

And then we help them with home economic classes and handicraft classes. We teach them about importance of education. And then one of the most important things we have is literacy.

You know, when we were traveling to set up these women fellowship groups, we got in so many places, we got over and over the question, can we have women fellowship meetings if none of the women in our church can read? And we would say, you mean no one can read? No, in our church, the only person that can read is the pastor. And so we told them, of course, you can have women fellowship meetings, it just takes a little more work. You know, and then we did a survey and we found that 54% of all our believers in our churches are illiterate.

54% and the majority of them are women. In India alone, there are about 442 million illiterate women, not counting the men and everybody else. So we started out with a scripture memorization program.

We need to get God's word into their hearts because only God's word can teach them how to walk in this world for the Lord. And only God's word can keep them from sin. And if God's word is in their heart, then the Holy Spirit can call it out and remind them and help them.

So we have a program, an ongoing program where every week in all our women fellowship groups, they memorize one scripture verse. Now, there may be just one person or two that can read and they will read it from the Bible. And they are in charge to teach everyone.

They have to repeat it and repeat it to each other. And we have a whole procedure of what they need to do. But by the end, everyone will have memorized this scripture.

And so every week there is at least one more scripture and one more scripture, and people can grow in the Lord that way. It's a blessing for their life because we can get up in the morning, I have my cup of coffee, I have my Bible and I do my devotion. And it gives me some direction for the day and some strength.

Our illiterate sisters cannot have that. So we told them, you memorize the Bible verses. Now in the morning, you get up, you don't go and wash your clothes or do something else.

You go and sit and you pray and you recall the scripture and you meditate on the scripture. So you can have your devotion, your time with the Lord like this. I remember one illiterate sister, she learned one Bible verse by heart.

She knows one Bible verse. She went evangelizing, witnessing with that one Bible verse. Do you know what happened? She led 40 people to the Lord.

You know, we are sometimes amazed the miracles God is doing through our illiterate sisters. You know, one group of these illiterate sisters, they go every month, every week out for witnessing to unreached families, unreached homes, unreached villages. And they've been through the village, house to house, telling people about the Lord.

And on that one outreach, these illiterate sisters led about five families to the Lord. And the Lord is really blessing them. They have very simple faith.

We told them, if someone is sick, you can pray for them. The Lord will heal them. And they do, and the Lord heals them.

And then we started to encourage the sisters in the churches. And we said to them, you know, if you know how to read and write, and there are women in your church that don't, why you don't try to teach them? You know, you teach them and see. And one of these ladies, it really touched their heart in one of the churches in New Delhi.

And she decided, I will teach these women in my church how to read so they can read the Bible. Because unless you can read the Bible, very difficult to grow in the Lord. And so she set out to do this.

And a few months later, we were traveling to Nepal and we came back and we were in Delhi. And then one of our sisters there was saying, you know, this one church, this sister, she succeeded in teaching five or six women how to read. So I said, I want to meet her.

We need to find out how she did it so we can recommend her method, you know? If she succeeded, it must be, you know, we need to learn from that. So she came and she brought her pastor's wife with her and her pastor. And then we asked her what she was doing.

She said, well, most of the ladies in our church, they are servants working for other people. So they only have time in the evening. So I had them come every evening and I will write letters, the letters, of course, in Hindi language, you know, and I would teach them and they have to practice it and practice and practice some more.

And she would work with them every day. And after a few months, all of them learned how to read. And she said, one of it was the pastor's wife.

And she had come here and she showed us how she can read now. She opened her Bible and she was reading for us a whole passage. And I was so thrilled.

And so I asked that sister that taught her, sister, are you, did you go to college? You know, I was thinking she must be a teacher or something. And she said, no, Andy, they call me Andy over there. She said, no, Andy, I only have a fourth grade education.

And when I heard that, I was so touched in my heart. This woman was a fourth grade education, loved these illiterate sisters so much that she decided she would teach them and she succeeded. And so I said to sister Gina, we were talking, sister Gina is our national leader for the women's fellowship.

I said, if she can succeed with a fourth grade education to teach these ladies, then surely we can do that in every church. And so we decided, you know, that our Indian sisters had to do that. I couldn't help them with that.

We need to develop a literacy training book. And so in 2009, a team of our sisters that had enough education, that were leaders in our women fellowships, they got together with some people that were also trained in this. And so they developed a literacy training book in Hindi language and we released it.

And then we had to train teachers for the churches. And now as of this year, this book is now in 13 different languages. Each language has their own script.

You cannot use one script. So they have to adapt it. And then they have to train teachers for every one of our churches.

Because if 54% of our people cannot read, we need an ongoing program, not just a program that is there for one time. So we need a person in every church that is able to gather these people together and to teach them. Because, you know, next year we will have many more people come to the church and they also will be literate.

So it has to be, it's a continuous ongoing program. And it has been an enormous blessing for our churches. And we not only offer that to our churches, but to the people of the community.

So people from the community that are not believers, they want to come, many of them. And they also want to learn how to read. Of course, we share the gospel at the same time.

And some of the lessons have Bible stories with it. After each lesson, the teacher will share something from God's word. And so they get to know the love of Jesus.

I remember reading in one community, we had about 200 ladies come. And they also wanted to learn how to read and write from the community. So many of them had burdens.

And so they share their burdens and our sisters are praying for them. And so many of them have opened their heart to the Lord. And even many of the government officials are so appreciative for this literacy program.

We have so many open doors because of it. Because it really will make an enormous difference in people's life. And it will bless them and open up a whole new world to them.

So our literacy program is something that our women fellowships are doing as an ongoing program. And every year, we add a few more languages. So it's always exciting.

Some of the languages sound exotic, like Cog, Baroque. And then as a women fellowship, we also have a widow's outreach. Now, if you know anything about India, the people worship a lot of gods and goddesses.

And their faith says, if a husband dies, it's the fault of his wife. Because in some previous life, she must have sinned greatly and done the wrong things. And for that reason, her husband died.

So these widows, it used to be before William Carey, they had this widow burning. I think you heard that, that is outlawed. The government is not allowing it anymore.

But widows are usually neglected, often thrown out from their families, their properties taken away, their money taken away, their house taken away. They are shunned, and many end up begging. And even the families that would like to keep them in their homes, they are under so much pressure from the community.

Now, it's not everywhere like that, but where the old things are still alive, widows are usually stripped of everything they have. And you see them flocking in some of these big cities at pilgrimage places as beggars in the streets. India has about 46 million widows.

And many, many of them live the saddest lives you can think of. Now, as a women fellowship, we have told our sisters in every community where we have a women fellowship group, we need to care for widows. And if they have lack of food, if they are sick, no one is looking after them.

If they are in need, then that is our outreach. And we have heard so many amazing testimonies. You know, when our sisters go and help these widows, what God is doing in the hearts, even of those that see it.

And we help them also, these widows, with Christmas gifts. Now, that is a whole different subject at Gospel for Asia. We have a catalog that comes out every time around Christmas time.

And people can look through the catalog and you can buy a chicken or a camel or a rabbit or something, or a cow, and you can give it as a gift to a poor family over there. And we will give it to them. And with that, they will also hear about the love of Christ.

But that gift of some chickens or that gift of a little goat or something will enable them to make a living. And so we help many of these widows with some of these gifts. Now, we have also sewing machines that we give to some of them.

And they learn tailoring. And then they can, instead of begging, they can do tailoring and make a living and even send their children to school. And then we have opened a center in West Bengal where there are so many widows.

And in that center, we care for them and we help them. And we try to, we help them to make a living. And we have a school for their children.

We call it Bridge of Hope School. And it's an outreach that is growing to these widows. As a women fellowship, we want to open more of these centers.

And I would like to tell you a lot of stories. Of course, we also enroll them in our literacy program. And we teach them and we love them.

And that is the most amazing things to them, that someone loves them. You know, I remember one of our women fellowships around Christmas time. They decided to buy shoes and give it to widows.

So they had about 30 widows or so. And each one got a pair of shoe. And these ladies, they were so touched.

They were saying to our sisters, now we know that God loves us. We also have a pastor's wife seminars that is also an ongoing program that we do in our women's fellowship. That is to teach and train our pastor's wives to be effective in ministry with their husband.

Just imagine, you know, a couple is, you know, the pastor got saved after he was married. You know, now he got a wife that never had been trained in a Bible school or anything, you know. So we have classes for these sisters.

And we help them to learn how to do outreach, how to teach a class, how to witness. And they are so happy to do that. And if we find out one of them is not able to read and write we will either in one of our programs enroll them.

If she's living somewhere away, we will have someone go and teach her so she'd be able to read the Bible and grow and be part of her husband's ministry. Now for this next year, we have every year we add something. It seems the Lord burdens us with something.

This next year, we want to teach health topics just like we teach the literacy program. We will have classes for our sisters in the churches and for the community ladies. And in that we will specifically address health issues and things that every woman is facing in her life and that these people have often no clue what to do.

So we are planning to develop maybe five different classes. And then this January we will have a doctor training them and some nurses training them. And we will pull from every district two ladies.

Hopefully some of them will have some kind of nursing experience or enough education. And then we will have this training this January. My daughter's husband is a medical doctor and he's a missionary and a preacher.

And so he's doing these classes for us and giving us this training. And then we will write it out and these sisters will go back and then they will travel. In one district, we may have 10, 15, 20 churches.

They will go from church to church and teach this program, these lessons. We will pick five lessons to start with on five different important subjects. And they will teach that in each church and we will invite the community ladies to attend.

And that will open a lot of doors in the community to share the love of Christ. And I know that the community leaders, they will be so glad if we help these ladies to learn things that will benefit their families and their children. Now, I have talked now so long about our Women Fellowship and you may be wondering what I'm doing really with that.

I help with the development of these programs. And I help with the teaching and with the training. And then I write a lot of the curriculum for our weekly Bible studies.

And then I go and help teach and train our Women Fellowship leaders, the ones that are on state and national level and seminars. And it's the most exciting thing and my heart is over there. I have come back from India in August and I will go back in December.

And while I'm here in the US, I write for our GFA ministry and I do some teaching for our staff and for our students we have. And then if someone invites me for a retreat and I'm in the country, then I will come and I will share with ladies like you. And I'm so privileged that the Lord allows me to have part in so much what he's doing among the unreached world.

And I think right now my time is up and I'm actually gone through all the things I wanted to tell you what I'm doing. But it all started out with a little girl that was 14 years old that said to the Lord, this is the only thing I want to do was my life when he called me. Now, please don't think I was perfect and I'm not perfect and I made enough mistakes, but my God was so gracious and so merciful and so loving to me that he has kept me.

And to me, it's the greatest privilege of my life that I get to serve him. And especially among those that never heard his name.

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