

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

A Textual Sermon

by Joe D. Schubert

“Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

One of the most interesting and inspiring chapters in the entire Bible is Hebrews 11. It is the great faith chapter. It contains the roll call of God’s faithful ones. The writer says:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. . . .

. . . By faith Moses, when he was grown up refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked unto the recompense of reward. . . . By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were swallowed up.

And what shall I more say? for the time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, . . . (Hebrews 11:8, 24-26, 29, 32, 33).

The opening two verses of chapter 12 build upon the background of Hebrews 11 and say, “Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, . . .”

These verses of Hebrews 11 and 12 contain a great inspiration toward Christian living and the hope of Christian victory. My aim in this lesson is to make this inspiration as real as I can to each of us.

I. THE COLOSSEUM

It will help us to recall that Hebrews 12:1, 2 was written in the first century. We don’t know exactly where. We don’t know for certain the year. We don’t know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews. But we do know it was written sometime in the course of the first century. It was written during a time when the Romans were ruling the world and at a time when Greek influence was strong. The writer uses an illustration which would help Christians of that age and Christians of all ages as well. The illustration we have just read has as its backdrop the huge Roman Colosseum. It had the usual oval around which the track was laid where the runners ran in the great Greek races. One end of the Colosseum was open or, at least, had a huge entranceway in it. Then, at the sides of the oval-shaped Colosseum, the rows of seats encircled one another, rising on top of each other all the way from the bottom to the top. The rise of those circles of seats was more abrupt than in an American coliseum. They were almost directly on top of one another.

In order to fully grasp the meaning of this text, we need also to remember that the Greeks were the great enthusiasts for physical prowess and physical ability. It was the Greeks who gave the world the long races, like the marathon. It was the Greeks who gave the world the Olympic games. Every youngster in ancient Greece was trained very early in running the long, arduous races. The Greeks exalted those who excelled by giving them high honors. Scarcely an honor in ancient Greece was as high as that of winning one of the major races. In this Colosseum, before the multitude of people sitting in row upon row of seats, the winner of the great races would be applauded and honored. He would be given a crown of olive leaves or oak leaves, a singular honor that even his grandchildren would later hear of and remember as long as they lived.

It is this setting that is the backdrop for the passage we have read together.

II. THE CROWD

Returning to our text, the writer says, "Therefore, let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." Get the picture, brothers and sisters. See the thousands of people, row upon row, sitting in the Colosseum, watching the races, and the Hebrew writer says, in essence, "You are running your Christian race. You're striving to achieve the victory toward which God has called you. You have your struggles. You have your problems. You have your needs. You have your discouragement. You have those behind you who are trying to overtake you. But just remember that as you run your race there are thousands of God's great men and women back through past ages spurring you on, counting on you, pulling for you, and encouraging you to make good all the way to the end." A tremendous encouragement is in that for us today. Those names of Hebrews 11 come to our minds. These great men and women of God are counting on us. They are pulling for us. They are urging us on to the victory that lies ahead.

It is difficult to live one's life alone. It is especially difficult to fight some great fight or battle alone. A great deal of help always comes when we recognize that others are praying for us and feeling with us as we face our temptations.

I remember reading somewhere the statement, "We are never strong when we're alone." I don't believe that statement is always true, but there is a lot of truth in it. We are often stronger when we are with those who are strong. When we are in the presence of strong and devoted hearts, it is easier for us to be stronger ourselves than if we were alone.

All of us are constantly surrounded by people who have different kinds of attitudes toward us and what we are striving to do. We are surrounded by a vast number of people, our contemporaries, a number of whom are watching our lives. Most of these people who live with us and watch our lives are not concerned to the slightest degree about whether we succeed or fail. The eyes of the multitude of the indifferent

are upon everyone of us. They are looking on. They are mere spectators, watching only one little part of a show. To most of these people, you and I don't really count for very much. They really could care less about the end result of our individual lives.

Besides these people, there are actually hostile witnesses around many of our lives. These are people who simply don't like us and they are hoping we will fail. Some of our critics live in a smaller world than we do. Because they do, they don't understand the scale on which we are living and thinking. They are marching to the drumbeat of a different drummer than the one to which we march. Because they don't understand the cadence, they are confused and critical of the lives we lead. According to Psalm 23, the table of each one of us is constantly being spread in the presence of our enemies, who continually are watching for our failure.

Many friendly witnesses are also watching our lives. Some of these also are our contemporaries. Faith is good and, in the presence of those who don't love us, faith may even become brave and courageous. But faith can also be lonely. Very few of us can make it without knowing that there is someone, somewhere, who believes in us, who is supporting us, and who is backing us. Think of the loving, supportive friends you have who believe in you. Think of their self-denial. Remember their prayers. Recall the anxieties with which they sent you forth into the world. Consider the hopes that they still cherish for your life. There are many people who love and trust us deeply.

Again, as we think of the witnesses around our lives, we have to include the congregation of the dead, those loved ones who have gone on—the friendly dead who are counting on us to succeed. There is reason to believe that the dead are still with us, pulling for us. In Luke 16 the Lord tells the story of Lazarus and the rich man that implicates this rather strongly, I believe. The rich man, who was insensitive to God's will, died and went into torment in Hades. He saw Abraham and Lazarus afar off in Paradise. The rich man begged him to let Lazarus just dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. This request, of course, could not be granted because after death there can be no change in one's status. Then come those significant words

in Luke 16:27, 28, where the rich man says, "I pray thee, therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house; for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment" This man's request could not be granted. But the fact he requested it shows me that those who are dead are aware, to some degree at least, of the lives of those of us on this earth who remain behind. They are pulling for us. Sometimes they want to warn us, as the rich man did, lest we come to the same tragic fate as did they.

There are also devoted Christian loved ones who have gone on and are concerned about us. Hebrews 12 tells us that there is this great cloud of witnesses from all the past ages into whose inheritance we have entered. They are counting on us and believing in us to complete the race that God has called us to run. Many of these great men and women of God who are named in Hebrews 11 laid down their lives unfinished. Many of their dreams, ideals, and hopes were never really brought to full realization. It belongs to us to pursue those dreams. So, brothers and sisters, we are not really beginning anything new today. We are just carrying it on in God's great cyclorama of history.

Something in all of this takes hold of us in a thrilling way. Ordinarily, people are sensitive to the pressure of society. There is not one of us who is not impressed by social pressure. Ordinarily, that social pressure is pulling us away from God, rather than toward Him. But here in this great inspired writing, the author reaches into the devil's tool box and takes away one of his most potent weapons, social pressure, and brings it to bear on the side of what is right, holy, and good. The writer is saying to us, in effect: "You're concerned about what other people are saying and thinking about your life, so I want you to know that there's a whole host of people you can't see, a great cloud of witnesses, who are pulling for you. Think of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Peter, Paul, and all the rest. Remember that this great cloud of witnesses is hoping that you will make a success of it."

Does this idea take hold of you? Here we are in our modern world, trying to be Christians. Sometimes we get terribly discouraged. Sometimes we think the only people who are really aware of us are the people whom we can see. But

that is not so. At this hour, thousands upon thousands of God's greatest people are urging us on to the victory.

Let me remind you that this great cloud of witnesses named in Hebrews 11 includes men and women who had real struggles in their lives. It includes those who had to make great pivotal decisions in their lives. They had the courage and the faith to make those pivotal decisions for God. Those decisions vitally affected not only their own lives but the lives of all of God's people.

Think, for example, of Abraham's great time of trial and testing. God had promised him years before that He would give him a son to continue the bloodline and through whom eventually the seed of the Savior would come. Then, think of that great day that must have put Abraham's mind whirling in confusion when God said, "Abraham, take this son Isaac, who is your promised heir, and sacrifice him as an offering to me on the altar." Abraham must have debated, "What should I do?" He had God's commandment. Yet, all of his rational reasoning was against it. He could not understand how God could possibly fulfill that promise and at the same time take his son. But the Bible says Abraham went up to that mountain and prepared for that sacrifice. He bound his own son and laid him on that altar and was just about to take his own son's life when God intervened. Abraham had a faith in his heart that was deep enough to know that if God allowed him to kill his son, God would raise him from the dead, if that was what it would take for God to fulfill His promises.

Think of that time when Moses, reared from a baby in the palace of Pharaoh himself by Pharaoh's own daughter, came to that pivotal time in his personal history. He had to choose whether to continue to enjoy a life of romance, power, prestige, and wealth as one of Egypt's native sons or suffer reproach and shame with the people of God. You know the choice he made. You know how vitally affected his own life was by that decision. You also know how that decision has affected the world.

Because these great men and women at those pivotal times in their personal lives made decisions for God, the world has been different. As the Hebrew writer thinks of all these great people,

he says simply, "(Of whom the world was not worthy), . . ." (Hebrews 11:38).

III. THE CHALLENGE

As each of these people faced momentous decisions in their own lives and made their decisions for God, we, as a people of God at this time, face a great pivotal point in our history. How we respond to this great decision will make all the difference in the world in our own lives and in the lives of countless others. How you and I respond to this challenge will determine whether or not the cause of New Testament Christianity will be firmly and solidly planted in this nation's most populous area in the Northeast. How you and I respond to this challenge will determine whether or not copies of God's word are placed in the hands of the 400 million people who live at this hour behind the Iron Curtain. When we understand the consequences of our choice, we cannot afford to fail. The spiritual destiny of millions is interwoven with our response at this historic point. We must not fail. I am convinced we will not fail.

Hebrews 12 speaks to us so pointedly at this kind of time in our lives. "Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, . . ."

Brethren, in the presence of all of history and all of heaven, we make our response to the greatest challenge that has ever been presented to this body of people. All of us who are making sacrificial gifts to this great challenge will never again be the same. Just as the response of Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David, and all the rest made their names forever remembered by God and His people; so also it will be with us. At this point in time, we have been given by God's grace an opportunity to make a decision for God that will link us up with eternity. As we make it we have a great cloud of witnesses believing in us, encouraging us, and counting on us.

CONCLUSION

If you need to give your life to God by being baptized for the washing away of your sins and the commitment of all you are to His purposes, we invite you to do it. If as a Christian you need to come and give your life in a deeper way to the purposes and will of God, will you do it? If you have moved into our area and are seeking a new church home and you want to work and serve with the people of God here, come.

Let us sense the spirit of history, the purpose of destiny, the high mission given to us by Almighty God to carry out in our time in His way.

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