

THE GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Hebrews 11:1-12:2

Hebrews 11 is one of the great chapters of the Bible. Part of its greatness is its rhythm. Anyone who has heard a black preacher will know what I mean. The Preacher starts slow and quiet, building up as he goes, picking up the tempo until he's ready to let rip, then stops on a high note.

All this starts in 11:1 with a theological definition. The Preacher has just finished his master class on the high priesthood of Jesus. If you can cast your minds back that far you will recall how that sermon-within-a-sermon ended with a challenge to persevere (10:36ff). It was a high point which leaves us wanting more. But the next section begins like a lecture: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (11:1). Of course, as a theological definition this statement is woefully incomplete. Faith is a big subject that cannot be summed up in a few words like this. However, we must remember the difference between a sermon and a lecture. (I trust you know the difference, but as an illustration, a theological lecture is like a multi-masted clipper, full rigged and running before a fair wind. It is a wonderful sight and stirs the heart. A sermon, on the other hand, though still a boat, is more like a landing-craft delivering the troops onto a contested beach-head.) Here the preacher's definition of faith is a practical one.

First of all, it describes what faith has: "the assurance of things hoped for". Faith is already a possession of the promises of God. Such faith is both an inward reality and an outward force. Inwardly, faith is a response to the trustworthiness of God. Here and now we see all hell breaking loose around us, but we know that God's promise of peace, justice, mercy and salvation can be relied on. The list of people about to follow is a list of those who believed that the God who promised is faithful (11:11).

But faith has an outward component as well. The word 'assurance' (being sure), is the same Greek word used way back in 1:3 where the preacher tells us that Jesus is "the exact representation of [God's] nature". In other words, faith is the exact representation of God's promises. Faith is more than an inner confidence that everything will turn out all right in the end; it is the reality of God's promises moving behind enemy lines right now.

So, faith is both inward assurance and outward manifestations. The inward assurance sings, "We shall overcome" and the outward manifestation marches against injustice. The inward assurance knows that God will "wipe every tear from their eyes, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:40, while the outward manifestation prays boldly for those who mourn, serves tenderly those who weep and works tirelessly to ease the pain of those who are wounded. Inwardly, faith moves hearts, outwardly faith moves mountains.

The Preacher's definition of faith also reminds us of what faith sees. It is being "certain of what we do not see". Paul reminds us that what is seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). For this reason we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). To the eye of faith this world is not random matter or equally random events, it is a creation (11:3), prepared by and ruled over by God. The naked eye sees trouble everywhere by faith knows that where sin increases, grace increases all the more (Romans 5:20). Faith, therefore, sings hymns with the theme of 'nevertheless':

*I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,
When at his bidding every storm is stilled,
Or who can say how great the jubilation
When all the hearts of men with love are filled.
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,
And myriad, myriad human voices sing.
And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth will answer,
"At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world is King!"*

The preacher goes on to give a list of some of those who lived out this 'nevertheless' faith. This list, which just about fills the rest of the chapter, appears at first glance to be almost random. It is roughly chronological but jumps around for no apparent reason. In fact 11:4-38 is not just one list, it's four. Each list is a set of examples that illustrates a point made earlier in the sermon. It's almost like those books that collect all the colour pictures into one place. Each group has something to say in illustration of an earlier assertion made about Jesus.

The first group (11:4-70) includes Abel, Enoch and Noah. The Preacher sees each of these as 'righteous men', foretastes of Jesus, "our apostle and high priest – who was faithful to the one who appointed him" (3:1-2). Time does not allow us to look at each of these three were described as men of faith who were commended, therefore, as righteous. They pleased God who "without faith it is impossible to please" (11:6). These three are not only examples worthy to be followed by later generations of Christians, they remind us that Jesus lived by faith and was the righteous one.

The next group, (11:8-16) are some who were on a journey of faith, reflecting Jesus who is the pioneer of our faith (12:2). This group includes Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. They travelled obediently as a result of their faith. Jesus, too, is seen as obediently leaving his home in Glory and travelling through this world. He too was a stranger and a pilgrim, travelling through this wilderness of suffering, but he never wavered. The examples are of faith journeyed, but never arriving. It is Jesus who is seen as completing the journey. In following their example we fulfil Jesus' command, "Follow me".

The third group of examples are those who were tested by suffering. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are given, (11:17-23). Their faith understood that what God had promised was beyond sight. Of course, Jesus himself "suffered so he is able to help those who suffer" (2:18). Faith sees suffering very differently from those who see only with their eyes. Without faith suffering is always destructive and cannot lead to any good. Such suffering may seem random and chaotic, but faith views things from a different perspective. The examples the Preacher gives makes a specific point. Some seem to think that suffering strengthens faith like blisters strengthen skin. Through suffering we develop calluses. The Preacher's view is somewhat different. God's testing of Abraham over Isaac did not produce a hardened Abraham but it did give him

a better vision of God's promise. These men had tried to follow God and they knew death was near. What is more, they had nothing to show for it – as least nothing that could be seen without the eyes of faith. Jesus' life, to all intent and purpose, seems to end in failure. But faith sees things differently. Under the pressure of testing and suffering the naked eye sees only the oppressor. We see only the jackboot of tyranny, the scars of child abuse, and the x-ray with a shadow on the lung. Faith sees all that too, it does not pretend there is no suffering, no evil, no disease. But faith also sees God, the God who promises to bring to an end all that harms and destroys, the God who provided a great high priest.

The final group of examples (11:23-38), are a mixed bag, bringing together the previous three groups and adding more names to the great cloud of witnesses down through the ages:

CALL: "And what more should I say?" (11:32)

RESPONSE: "Tell it all, brother, tell it all!"

CALL: "O brothers and sisters, time would fail me to tell it all..." (11:32)

RESPONSE: "No, brother, tell it all!"

CALL: "I'd have to tell about Gideon and Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets..." (11:32)

RESPONSE: "Yes! Tell it all, brother. Preach on!"

CALL: "I'd have to tell about those whose faith conquered kingdoms and shut up lion's mouths. I'd have to tell about the women who were tortured, men who were mighty in war, children of God who were flogged and stoned... I tell you brothers and sisters, the world was not worthy of them, not worthy at all!" (11:33-38)

RESPONSE: "No, no, not at all!"

Like the black preachers referred to earlier, the Preacher has drawn his congregation to a high point. He has described an unbroken chain of faith from the very beginnings of their story, right up to their doorstep, and then suddenly he pauses. He draws breath during which the congregation think, "Here we go, now for the heart-stirring climax". But the preacher shocks them with the quiet assertion that though all of these heroes of the faith were commended for their faith, "none of them received what had been promised" (11:39).

All that faith, all that righteousness, all that suffering, all those endless miles of journeying and they did not receive what was promised. The Preacher mentioned this earlier, (11:13), but now it is underlined and invites the question, "But why?" But before anyone in the congregation can shout out an objection, the Preacher gives us an answer, and it is even more shocking than the question. Stop and read 11:40 again. Okay. We can accept that God had something better planned. The whole sermon has been about God providing something better. We know the Preacher means Jesus. This has been a constant refrain throughout this sermon: Jesus is better than the angels (1:4), he brings a better hope (7:19), and a better covenant (7:22), with better promises (8:6), sealed with better sacrifices (9:23), he offers a better inheritances (10:34), even a better resurrection (11:35). But all this had to wait until there was a better high priest (7:28).

But the second half of 11:40 is truly astounding. “God had planned,” we are told, “That only together with us would they be made perfect”. Now, you may be willing to accept that *we* need *them*, but the Preacher says *they* need *us* before they could receive the better promise – “apart from us” they could not be made perfect. This does not mean, of course, that Abraham and Moses are redeemed by me or you, only Jesus saves. But what it does mean is that for the great cloud of witnesses to be complete we need to be there. We are a team, and a team is diminished by a missing member. You and I are needed to play our part in the great chain of salvation that runs through all of history. If we give up and let go, everyone is diminished. Abraham and Moses have played their part, now it’s up to you and me to take our place in the great list.

The great clouds of witnesses (12:1) are not just interested bystanders. The Preacher has slightly altered the metaphor here. Instead of an unbroken chain we now see a sports arena full of athletes – and not just on the field but in the stands as well. They have run their race and now it’s our turn. They are there to cheer on the next generation. So as Frank emerges from the tunnel into the bright light of the stadium Abraham, Moses, David and all those other men and women of faith, known and unknown, rise to their feet to cheer him on.

We may be winded and tired, but this is an important race before a specially invited audience. We are going to loose everything that shows us down, everything that hinders us in any way. But more than that, we keep our eyes fixed on our team leader. Jesus has gone before us; he has blazed the trail, cleared the track and made it possible for us to run. When we see the loving, strong, merciful and faithful way he ran the race we are motivated to lace up our running shoes, grasp the baton and to head for the finishing line.

One question remains – the race is hard, our muscles are tired and we lose heart. If the race is so joyful, we wonder, why does it have to be so hard? That is the subject of our next study.

Amen

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