

FBC Service Sunday June 12 2022 Hebrews 12:1-4 Heavenly Witnesses

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us."

Our text sums up the main teaching of what the writer to Hebrews is trying to get at in the entire chapter 11, which is one of the greatest chapters in the Bible. We read in verse 1 that believers on the Lord Jesus are "*surrounded by a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith.*"

There are those who say that this passage refers to the famous Roman and Greek games, held in a big amphitheatre, and down on the track below are the participants running the race. Up above them, and surrounding them in the great stadium, are rows upon rows of spectators watching them as they run.

Today at every Olympic Games, politics permitting, athletes from many nations fill the arena. Imagine that you're high up in the stadium, looking down on the athletes as they compete for Olympic gold. Some are throwing the javelin; others throwing the shot put.

Over there, a man gets ready for the pole vault; a few feet away a group of runners stretch in preparation for the 100 metres. The stands are crowded with spectators from all over the world, cheering for their athletes as they witness the events unfolding.

Hebrews 12:1 pictures the saints on earth in the arena, while the saints in the heavenly grandstands cheer them on. Looking around, you see James and John, over there is Paul, and you see Peter and John Mark not far away.

Our text says "*we are surrounded by a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith.*" If you're like me, you may have often wondered who is it that makes up this "**great cloud of witnesses?**

There are two interpretations of this passage. Let's look at the first one. It has the very attractive idea that these witnesses with which believers are surrounded by, are spectators in heaven, saints in heaven who behold us down here on earth.

There isn't universal agreement on who they are, as the other view is the writer is referring to the "**heroes of faith**" that the author has just mentioned in Hebrews 11, or countless others as well.

These are people whose names will never show up in the world's history books, but who strove in their own way, to live by faith in the particular time and place that God placed them.

If we hold to the first image of our text: You and I are down on the playing field of the great arena, and up in the stands are all the saints, the ones who've been perfected in love, more than we could ever number. And they're watching and cheering for us.

This view pictures the saints on earth in the arena while the saints in the heavenly grandstands cheer them on. **They're called "a huge cloud of witnesses."** These are precious loved ones who have gone before us, who have "fought the good fight and finished the course," loved ones who died in Christ.

You can do it! Trust in Jesus. Keep believing,” they shout from heaven. When you feel like quitting, you can hear them calling out to you, “Don’t give up now. You’re not that far from the finish line.”

These are people from human history, all gathered together in eternity, watching those of us who are still going at it down here on the playing field of the great arena we call planet Earth.

This is a very attractive idea, because some people want to be comforted by the idea that their loved ones, mothers and dads, sisters and brothers, children and husbands and wives, are watching them as they’re running the race of life down here.

So here we have a great cloud of witnesses, some who have borne witness at the jeopardy of their lives to something they know. These people walked with God. They were men and women of faith!

They testify to us that the life of faith pays off, now and forever. They bear witness to what they know. They walked with God and lived in communion with Him and experienced His blessing on their lives.

Can the saints in heaven really see us on earth? There are certainly many who believe they can.

I don’t know the precise answer to that question, but Hebrews 12:1 at least allows us to think of them as cheering us on.

The late Charles Spurgeon, often called the Prince of Preachers, believed that the huge clouds of witnesses are saints we know personally: parents, spouses, even children, friends, and fellow church members— all those who have gone before us.

Unlike the fans at a sporting event, these fans have lost their capacity for being those people who get under your skin at sporting events by their crude talk and behaviour. Having been perfected in love, they’re no longer petty, or insulting.

When we mess up and misplay, they don’t shout, “Did you see that, my grandmother could have made that play!”

Having once played the game themselves in the great arena of life, they know how very hard it can be to make the plays. They remember their own stumbling, their own misplays.

Here’s another thing about these fans — this great cloud of witnesses.

From the perspective of heaven, they realize all the more clearly that we really are all connected, that this race we’re competing in is more of a relay than a solo race, and that in a sense; the race isn’t over until everybody has been brought in to join that great cloud of witnesses.

And what are the “plays” that they are watching, and rooting for us? Living by faith means different things at different times. At times it’s big things, but mostly it’s little things — the little moment by moment choices with which life confronts us.

Some of the most important plays that the great crowd of witnesses up in the stands are rooting for us to make, are those that take place after we’ve stumbled and fallen, because Lord knows, we’ve all

blown it from time to time. Whether we'll lie there and give up, or whether we'll get up, once more to try again.

It's striking to ponder this fact that since First Baptist church has been around for 150 years, the majority of its members now live on the other side. **What a great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on!**

I wonder how loud they were cheering for us as we celebrated 150 Years of Faith and Fellowship on May 1. And you know folks, we will always remember all those former witnesses.

We hear them as they say to us - it's to you, the present generation that we your forefathers passed the torch. We expect you with determination to carry on the work here at First Baptist. To earnestly defend the faith of Christ, so precious to us who founded this congregation so many years ago.

Death can't separate us from the saints in heaven. Heaven is not as far away as we might think.

When you were a child, you maybe pictured heaven as somewhere beyond the farthest galaxy, a wonderful land so far away that you would need a space ship to get there. Hebrews 12:22-24 offers a different picture. These verses tell us something amazing about what the gospel has done for us:

"But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven."

You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Three times the writer uses the phrase **"you have come."** The word literally means "to come near or face-to-face."

Once we were far from God, but now in Christ we have come into God's very presence. Once we were far away, but now in Christ we've come into the presence of the spirits of righteous men and women made perfect—**a clear reference to believers in heaven.**

Several of our hymns speak of this aspect of our communion with the saints in heaven. The last verse of "The Church's One Foundation" mentions it quite clearly:

Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,

And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.

O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we

Like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with Thee:

As I look back, over my life, I thank God for the many who have cheered me on, and some I didn't even notice at the time. To think of the heroes of the faith, with all their mixed up stories and

adventures, cheering me and you on now, like a great cloud of witnesses, is incredibly moving and sustaining.

On days when faith feels like hard work, or when I might be tempted to step out of the race and sit on the side lines, I need that huge crowd of witnesses to keep me buoyant and undeterred.

When I feel as though I'm not doing very well, it's good to know there are those who will and do encourage me – to keep “looking unto Jesus” etc

We have communion with the saints in heaven.

Hebrews 12:1 speaks of this when it says we're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Think of what he is saying:

We're not that far from heaven.

We're not that far from our loved ones in heaven.

We're not that far from God.

We're not that far from Jesus himself.

Heaven is a real place, a prepared place for a prepared people. It's where Jesus is right now, and it's not far away from us. Between us and heaven there's a gossamer veil called death. To us that veil seems dark and forbidding, but in Christ that veil has become the portal to eternal reality. **Psalm 23.**

Perhaps we should think of all the eternal realities as simply being in a different dimension of reality—not visible to us in this life, but near us and around us all the time—like the angels surrounding the armies of Israel that Elisha showed to his servant in 2 Kings 6:15-17.

The angels were there all the time, but the servant could not see them until his eyes were opened.

The great hymn **“For All the Saints”** contains a verse that speaks to this truth:

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,

Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,

And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

What does this mean? Death cannot destroy our fellowship with the saints of God.

We're one with them and they are one with us. I don't mean that we can communicate with them. The Bible specifically forbids that.

We mean that the saints of God are alive in heaven while we're alive on earth. And they're not that far away from us. One day we will be reunited with them. They're gone from our sight but they're not gone from God. And they aren't really gone from us either.

As we praise God this morning on earth, they join us in praising God in heaven. That's the "mystic sweet communion" the hymn writer had in mind.

Theologians sometimes speak of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. We're the church militant because the battle rages around us every day, and we're called to fight the good fight and to take up the whole armour of God.

But one day we'll lay our weapons down, our battles will be over, and the victory will be won. In that happy day we'll join the Church Triumphant in heaven. But whether we're on earth today or in heaven tomorrow, we're still part of the church of Jesus Christ.

There's another verse of "**For All the Saints**" that brings all the strands of truth together:

O blest communion, fellowship divine!

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;

All are one in Thee, for all are Thine.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

From time to time we've looked in Hebrews 11 at the examples of faith listed there. We didn't do this so you could answer Bible trivia questions. We looked at these accounts as a way of encouraging us to trust God. Common men and women put their trust in the Lord and He did great things through them.

These people did not give up when life got hard. We shouldn't give up on life and we shouldn't give up on the Lord. God is working even when it feels like He is far away. He is never confused or surprised by the things that happen in life. He is constantly working in circumstances to bring us to Him.

It's now our turn to run the race of faith. Each generation must choose whether or not they will run the race and whether they will run it well.

If we choose to run we need to do be focused. There will be hills and valleys, there will be good times and bad times. There will be people cheering and people criticizing and attacking. All these things are part of the race.

The thing we need to remember is what is at the finish line. As you travel for a family vacation what keeps you going is remembering the destination: (the mountains, Disneyworld, a cruise ship etc.)

What we need to remember is that we're headed toward a forever with our Lord. At the finish line of this race, Jesus will be waiting for us. His arms will be open and as He wraps them around us we will hear Him say, "Welcome Home".

And standing around us will be friends, family, and the saints of old who have been cheering us on throughout the struggles of our lives. At that moment every struggle will seem as nothing compared to the joy that's now present.

If we remember that picture, if we keep that goal in our head, if we're diligent as we run this all important race and remind ourselves that we're running for the One who has loved us from before the creation of the world, we'll be able to throw off those things that weigh us down.

We will eventually find that singleness of purpose that helps us to run freely and run well. And when our race is over, we will hear the cheers and we will leave a path for those who follow us . . . our friends and our family.

And then it will be our turn to cheer for them.