

The Cloud of Witnesses

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith and its power to achieve great things, and encourages listeners to run the race of faith with patience and perseverance.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:32, Hebrews 12:1

Topics: "Faith", "Perseverance"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the significance of the 'cloud of witnesses' in Hebrews 12:1, illustrating how these figures exemplify faith through their achievements, personal qualities, sufferings, and the blessings they received from God. He encourages believers to draw inspiration from these witnesses, who represent the potential of faith to conquer personal kingdoms, endure trials, and claim God's promises. Simpson urges the congregation to lay aside weights and sins that hinder their spiritual race, advocating for a patient and enduring faith that looks to Jesus as the ultimate example and source of strength. He concludes by highlighting that believers today have the advantage of the Holy Spirit and the living Christ, enabling them to run their race with confidence and purpose.

Transcript

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us 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" (Heb. 12: 1).

The writer has already given us three distinct star clusters in the firmament of faith, and now he sums up a great multitude, of whom the time would fail to tell individually, in one mighty cloud of witnesses, identified rather by their achievements than by their names. His mind becomes lost in a cloud of light, a great Milky Way, as it were, of countless stars spanning the sky of his holy vision. But there is no confusion. The examples fall into distinct classes, and stand for definite lessons of faith and obedience.

I. THE CLOUD ITSELF

Let us look at the cloud itself. It contains four classes of witnesses representing first, the achievements that spring from faith, or what faith can do; next, the personal qualities that spring from faith, or what faith can be; third, the sufferings of faith, or what faith can endure; and finally, the blessings that faith can claim from God, or what faith can receive.

1. The achievements of faith. "Who through faith subdued kingdoms, . . . stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, . . . turned to flight the armies of the aliens." Three classes of achievements are here described. The subjugation of kingdoms refers to Joshua and David; it was by faith that they won their great inheritance. Let us not think that there are no kingdoms left for us to conquer. There are mightier victors still than Alexander or Tamerlane.

"He that ruleth his spirit [is greater] than he that taketh a city." There are kingdoms of self-conquest that cost more than a cavalry charge or a bombardment from besieging armies, and there are kingdoms of glorious service for God and the world which are being won by the heroes of faith in every age. When Robert Moffat entered South Africa as a physical and moral wilderness and left it not only one of the richest provinces of the British Empire, but one of the most successful of modern mission fields, a kingdom was subdued more valuable than the empires of the Caesars.

When David Livingstone fought and won the battle of his own education and preparation for the ministry, and then went forth to traverse all the heart of Africa and win it from barbarism to civilization, commerce, and Christ, and to leave upon the hearts of the natives the memory of his own high character and stainless goodness, so that for his sake the white man is still treated with kindness and reverence in the regions through which he passed, Livingstone subdued a kingdom whose worth can never be told.

When William Duncan sat down amid the inhospitable regions of northern Canada and out of the wild forest and wilder Indian tribes slowly built up a settlement and a colony of civilized and Christian natives, who can be seen today in the village of Metlakatlah, an object lesson of Christian civilization, with their industries, schools, chapel, and happy homes, surely it is a kingdom for which earthly heroes might well lay down their crowns. When John Geddie passed up to his great reward from the New Hebrides and left upon his tombstone this simple epitaph telling the story of thirty years of self-denying triumph: "When he came there were no Christians, when he left there were no heathen," surely it was a triumph for which angels would gladly leave their thrones.

And there are such kingdoms still left in the wide field of this sinful world, if only we have the faith and love to win them for God. As Joshua said to the men of Ephraim when they asked him for a larger inheritance: "Go to the mountains and conquer for yourself all you want. You can have as much as you will subdue." So still God is saying to every aspiring soul: "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you." You may conquer your own kingdom. You may forge your own crown. You may win as much as you will dare. Never was there an age with such possibilities of heroic faith and self-denial as today.

The Son of God goes forth to war

A kingly crown to gain,

His blood-red banner streams afar,

Who follows in His train?

Next he speaks of those who through faith achieved deliverance from dangers. Three kinds of dangers are mentioned; namely, wild beasts, the elements of nature, such as fire, and the sword of cruel men. Of course, this includes the story of Daniel in Babylon, of his three companions who passed unscathed through the fiery furnace, and of Peter who was rescued at the last moment from the sword of Herod in

answer to the faith and prayers of the disciples. But the story of divine deliverance did not end with the age and the page of inspiration. Still the heroic servant of the cross can tell of the tiger of the jungle shrinking away from the fearless eye of the undaunted missionary; of the stormy wind becoming a calm, or the becalmed vessel being saved by the breeze that came in answer to the prayer of the suppliant missionary, and bore them safely from the cannibal shore; and of the oft-repeated story of the Covenanters in Scotland, of the Waldenses in Italy, and of missionaries in pagan lands, who were saved from the cruel hatred of their persecutors by providential interpositions supernatural and divine. Dr. Paton tells of a night when the savages had surrounded his cottage and determined to have his life. But afraid to venture into his immediate presence, they set fire to the outbuildings of his home, and the wind was fiercely driving the flames to the house itself. But the good man calmly prayed to God, and lo, the wind was changed to the opposite direction and the flames were swept back into the faces of the foes, who fled in dismay, pursued by the missionary as he shouted to them the warnings and threatenings of his God; and they fled as from an avenging angel. When the story of our individual lives is all told in the light of eternity, and we see the hidden dangers from which the hand of love has oft delivered, how we will wonder and adore the God of faith, and praise Him for the faith of God!

There is still a third class of achievements; namely, victory over adverse circumstances and armies, "Turned to flight the armies of the aliens." Doubtless he was thinking when he wrote these lines of David's triumphs over the Philistines and the later victories of Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Josiah, and Hezekiah, and of the legions who tried in vain to capture Elijah and found themselves out-witted, stricken with blindness or with death; or, of Elisha, surrounded by heavenly horses and chariots. But the story of victory over difficulties and enemies is not yet ended. Every great work for God has to face opposition and attack, and our strongest weapon still is to believe and wait, and to see our God triumph, until instead of fearing and hating our foes, we shall pity them from the depths of our hearts and pray for them in tender compassion, as we behold their humiliation and ruin.

Beloved, shall we claim our place among the conquerors of faith and count all the difficulties and foes that surround us this very hour as only God's challenges to win a crown, and God's opportunities to enable us to prove the possibilities of faith and the power of God?

2. The personal qualities which faith gives. "Who through faith . . . wrought righteousness, . . . out of weakness were made strong." This is what faith can be. Spiritual righteousness and both spiritual and physical strength, these are its personal fruits. There is no greater miracle in Bible history than the personal characters of the men of faith. See Daniel in Babylon, against whom his foes were obliged to say: "We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God." Note the three men who could answer Nebuchadnezzar's threat with the lofty defiance: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter . . . be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." These men were a greater stumbling block and wonder to the heathen world than even the miracle of their deliverance. There is nothing mightier than personal goodness and virtue, and it is today the strongest proof of the power of faith and the grace of God.

The London Christian in publishing a sermon of Rev. F. B. Meyer, related the following incident concerning it. Among the hearers was a very rough and ill-tempered man, of whom his wife and family had often cause to be much afraid. That morning as he returned from church his wife met him with terror, for she had just had the misfortune to drop the cage containing his favorite canary, killing the bird, and she expected as usual a violent storm and a cruel beating, but to her amazement he simply smiled when she told him,

and said, "Never mind, Mary, I am glad it was not you." Her little boy was looking on behind the scene, and afterwards came up to his mamma and said: "What's the matter with papa? I thought he'd nearly kill you, but he didn't do nuffin'." Yes, it was the other side of the sermon. It was the faith that "works righteousness" which tamed his wild and savage heart into gentleness, and made the desert blossom like the rose. It has done it, beloved, for you and for me, and it can do it for any temperament, in the face of any situation, and it can do it this moment if you will only believe and receive.

Then faith is just as effectual for physical as for spiritual strength. The faith that strengthened Sara to become the mother of the seed of promise, that made Samson mightier than the giants of Philistia, can still heal the sick and bring the life also of Jesus to quicken our mortal bodies and still make it true of us as of our fathers: "Who through faith . . . out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

3. The sufferings of faith. Its supreme power appears in the hour of trial. Every variety of suffering is here described. There is pain, shame, privation, temptation, and even death itself. But faith not only enabled them to endure, but even to triumph over persecution, pain, reproach, and death. "What can your Christ do for you?" they asked the little martyr of Antioch as they beat him before the judges and the soldiers until he was almost insensible. "My Christ," he said, "can make me so happy that I scarcely feel your blows." And when they stretched him on the rack until life was almost gone, they brought him back and asked him again: "What can Christ do for you now?" "He can make me love my enemies," the hero answered, "and pray for those who despitefully use me and persecute me." Once more the awful ordeal was renewed and once more they brought him back from death to torture him with the same question, and he meekly breathed out his last breath with the sweet reply: "My Christ can take me to Himself where I shall never suffer pain again." Such was the story of ancient martyrdom ten thousand times repeated by noble children, heroic maidens, venerable fathers, insulted mothers, and a great cloud of witnesses of whom the world was not worthy. No longer are we compelled to prove our faith at such a cost, but there are daily martyrdoms, there are little annoyances, there are ceaseless fires of humiliation, temptation and pain that are often harder than one great sacrifice, but still the grace that comes to faith can suffer long and be kind, can endure all things, and even count it all joy when we fall into divers temptations. It is not merely suffering that God asks, but triumphant suffering, suffering that keeps its love, its sweetness, its shining face and triumphant song, and for the joy set before us endures the cross despising the shame.

4. The last class of witnesses in this catalogue includes those who through faith "obtained promises," and received blessings from the hand of God. This is the highest province of faith. It is not so much what we do, what we suffer, what we are, as what we take from Him. Faith is just an open hand and all its power comes from outside itself. It brings us into contact with God and receives His all-sufficiency, for He gives what He commands and supplies what He requires. Therefore the chief business of faith is not so much to be as not to be. Its very weakness is its strongest plea. Therefore we find that those who took most from God through faith were not strong men but feeble women. The very height of its achievements is this: "Women received their dead raised to life again." Still faith can take from God as much as it will dare to claim. The treasure house is as full, the promise as large, and the need is as vast as in the days of old. Still there are "given unto us exceeding great and precious promises," and "all things that pertain unto life and godliness," and still we may obtain "like precious faith" to claim these promises and receive this fullness of His power. This is today the great province of faith, and the men who know how to use this victorious weapon are the men who as in the days of old shall once more prove what faith can do, can suffer, by what faith can receive. So let us take the fullness of our inheritance that we may give it back in

service to God and blessing to the race.

II. THEIR WITNESS TO US

What is the message of this cloud of witnesses to us? What is our relation to them?

1. They encompass us. Somehow we are closely related to them. They have preceded us in the race and perhaps they are watching us now as spectators from the galleries. There is an inspiration in a noble past telling us that what man once did man may do again. "Soldiers," said Napoleon to his little band at the battle of the Pyramids, "from yonder pyramids forty centuries are watching you to see you do your duty." But this cloud of witnesses covers more than forty centuries. The good of all the ages are perhaps surveying us as we follow on; at least we may survey their glorious example and follow in their footsteps.

2. But they call us to run the race ourselves. This is not a mere play that we are looking at for our entertainment. It is for us a tremendous and a living reality. We are standing in the arena. We are in the dust and heat of the conflict. Our crown is still at stake. Our very life is hanging in the balance. For us it means the most strenuous endurance. It is not a dream of sentiment, and it is not a piece of fine art, but it is a sober and awful reality involving the stake of every interest that the heart can hold most dear.

3. It means the most careful preparation for the contest. "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us." In the athletic contests of today we find the competitors are willing to sacrifice every appetite and indulgence while training for the course, and in this heavenly race there are things to be laid down, sacrifices to be made, self-denials to be proved without which we cannot hope to win the prize. The sin which so easily besets us must be laid aside, whether this be some easily besetting habit into which we are most likely to fall, or simply the sin of unbelief against which the whole force of this epistle has been directed, the one sin which leads to all other sins. But not only so, there are also weights as well as sins that must be laid down, things not necessarily wrong in themselves, but things that hinder us in our course, which each heart must learn from its own experience and the voice of a sensitive conscience. All things may be lawful, but all things edify not. The question is how does it affect our spiritual life, our love to Christ, our readiness for service, our power in prayer? It is by this that we must decide the question of what is best. The prize is too precious, the issue too vast, and eternity too long to be weighed in the balance with any bauble of earthly pleasure or earthly gain.

4. We must run the race with patience. Not by paroxysms of sudden enthusiasm, but by the slow and steady plod of a life of patient endurance shall the struggle be won and the victory be made complete. Faith must learn to stand as well as to run, and having done all, at last to stand approved and crowned.

5. But after all that has been said the apostle adds that these glorious witnesses failed to receive the fullness of the promise. "God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." What is this better thing wherein we possess the advantage over them? Surely it is in this, that we have the Holy Ghost and the living Christ, of which they had but the promise and the occasional visitation. To us the Spirit has come to abide. In us the living Christ dwells not only as the Example, but as "the author and finisher of our faith." Not only are we called to look up the shining way whither the Forerunner has gone in -- but He comes back to hold our hand and lead us up the steps of faith until we reach our coronation too -- but all that He has won we also may claim, and where He has entered in there we may follow.

A bright and intelligent young lad from a very poor family had been received to a position of confidence and responsibility not only in the business but also in the family of his employer. One night he had been invited to spend the evening at a social gathering in this home of wealth and luxury. Of course he never took his family with him for they were wretchedly poor, and all that he could do was just to keep them from destitution. But late that evening a gentle tapping was heard on the door of the mansion and when opened two little tots were standing there clothed in rags and as dirty as little animals, and they timidly said: "Please may we come in? our elder brother is in there." It is needless to say that they were very cordially welcomed, and yet it would not be strange if that elder brother flushed with shame and hurried away with his little wards as soon as possible. But there is one palace home where the poorest sinner may come with boldness, and knocking at the door may say: "May I come in? my Elder Brother is there." The doors will swing wide open. The Elder Brother will meet us with a welcome which will have in it no flush of reproach or shame, for "He is not ashamed to call us brethren," and all that He has shall be ours. This is the next vision that comes before us in the cloud of witnesses. And so as the witnesses pass by let us lift up our eyes and see "no man save Jesus only," and go forth to run the race "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith."

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