

# A Great Cloud of Witnesses

*“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.”*

*—Hebrews 12:1*

**IN THE ELEVENTH CHAP-**  
ter of Hebrews, the Apostle Paul put together for us a marvelous array of the lives and faith of many Old Testament people of God. The men and women whom he referred to, and in some cases named, each had an incredible life which exhibited trust in the true and living Lord. They lived in different lands, and comprised many cultures. Their lives

spanned a period of four thousand years. Nowhere in the annals of literature are there more fascinating stories than the histories of God’s people recorded in his Word. In our opening verse, which immediately follows his listing of faithful ones of old in the eleventh chapter, Paul calls them a “cloud of witnesses.” (vs. 1) They make up a group which has been set before our minds to contemplate. The faith and actions of their lives surround us even to this very day.

Something made those people unique. Certainly, it was not their wealth or status that made them unusual, since we learn that many of them were poor. Paul says that they wandered in desert places—many were shepherds and herdsmen. A number of them, however, were powerful, wealthy people who held high positions. They included kings, counselors, priests, judges, prophets, and governors. Both men and women were mentioned by Paul as part of this group. Although the majority were Israelites, some lived before the nation of Israel came into existence. A few were called from among the Gentiles—some Moabites and Canaanites. A large variety was included in that cloud of witnesses.

However, they all shared certain qualities and characteristics that made them who they were, causing them to stand out from those around them. They could have lived anywhere, in any age, or in other circumstances, and they would have conducted their lives in the same manner. It would not matter if they had lived during the period of the Judges, or the Babylonian captivity, or before the Flood. It would not matter if they were in the courts of Pharaoh, working in the administrative offices of Nebuchadnezzar, or plowing in the fields. It did not matter where they were, or what they were doing, they were unique among mankind. Through thousands of years, they exhibited the rare, Godlike qualities which set them apart from the average person. In short, they were heroes of faith.

## **ONE TRUE AND LIVING GOD**

There is one prerequisite that these witnesses shared in common. This necessary characteristic we

find illustrated in a very touching and dramatic manner by the Apostle Paul in Hebrews 11:31, where he refers to Rahab, a woman who was unusual in many respects. The fact that she was a woman outstanding enough to be mentioned is unique, especially when women in her time were often considered merely as possessions of men. Secondly, her faith was unusual because she was not an Israelite. She was born into a culture steeped in heathenism, and that practiced the sacrifice of human beings to its gods. Likewise, from a Christian perspective, she was an unusual example to choose to depict faith because she was a prostitute.

In the account of this unique woman, we read the words of Rahab to the spies who had come to do reconnaissance in Jericho before Joshua attempted to conquer that city. She said, "I know that the LORD has given Israel this land. . . . We heard how the LORD dried up the Red Sea so you could leave Egypt." (Josh. 2:9,10, *Contemporary English Version*) This was an amazing remark, since it had been forty years since that event had occurred, in a land far away from Jericho. Yet, Rahab had heard about the crossing of the Red Sea by Israel, and recalled how God had miraculously brought his people safely across, destroying the pursuing Egyptians. Then, in faith she claimed, "The Lord your God rules heaven and earth."—vs. 11, *CEV*

That is what made her unique. She, and all the cloud of witnesses, believed in the one, true, living, all-powerful God. That kind of faith was a rarity at that time. Nearly all other cultures during that period of time had a multiplicity of gods. They had sun gods, moon gods, tree gods, river gods, and

many other designations. They had gods made of stone, wood, gold, and silver. They had gods in the form of large monuments, portable gods, and even those that could be carried in one's hand. Some cultures had gods for every season, occasion or probability. Out of that incredible mass of humanity living under such beliefs, we suppose that there were very few who believed in just the one, single, true, and almighty God.

Not only was the faith of the cloud of witnesses unique, but the God whom they worshiped was also unique in that he was all-loving, all-powerful, all-wise and perfectly just. Yet, at the same time, he was kindly and lovingly interested in each of their lives, and considered them his friends. (Exod. 33:11; James 2:23) These faithful men and women could see this difference between the one true God and the many false and powerless heathen gods. They could see and appreciate the righteousness displayed in his judgments, in his laws, and in his actions of kindness on their behalf.

He was not a god who vengefully required human sacrifices to appease his anger. He was not a god who created the earth or humanity in vain. He was not a god who toyed with his creatures, giving them a taste of the joys of life, but in the end having a plan which provided for the saving of just a few of them, and unmercifully punishing the majority forever.

These men and women of faith became aware of all this information concerning God, and they communicated their knowledge to those around them. That is why they were called God's "witnesses." Even today, they continue to witness to us through

their recorded lives. As they followed God's laws, trying to please him, the gap between them and their fellowmen widened. They were so moved by what they saw in their wonderful God that their lives were changed. His ways became their ways, and their motivation gradually evolved into the desire to be pleasing to such a wonderful, righteous Creator. Their belief in the one God made them who they were.

## **LIVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Another distinguishing quality which this great cloud of witnesses possessed was what the Scriptures term as righteousness. The Prophet Ezekiel, historically, lived in the middle of this period of God's cloud of witnesses. From his standpoint, however, he could look still farther back at earlier witnesses making up that group, and he saw three righteous men—Noah, Daniel and Job. (Ezek. 14:20) When we recall their life's experiences, we indeed see the quality of righteousness in each of them.

Looking briefly at Daniel's life, we find that he so distinguished himself among the administrators of the kingdom of Babylon—which had, as an empire, ruled many nations—that the new king, Darius the Median, planned to place him in the highest office over the entire kingdom. (Dan. 6:1-3) This was despite the fact that Daniel had been a slave, captured by Nebuchadnezzar during the overthrow of Israel.

Daniel's competitors for this high position were jealous of him. They tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of governmental affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption, lack of judgment, or incompetence in him.

Finally they said, “We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God.” (vs. 5) Daniel was a righteous man in whom they could not find any faults.

Although we know the ones who made up this cloud of witnesses were not actually perfect, as was our Lord Jesus, yet we find that they did have a deep appreciation of what righteousness was. They saw the leadings of their God, and they followed them despite the cost. Often it cost them very dearly—their reputations and sometimes even their lives. This was true of men such as Joseph, Noah, Job, David, and women like Hannah, Naomi, Esther, and Elizabeth. Righteousness was the fabric of their lives. They tried to the best of their abilities, as much as their imperfect bodies would allow them to do, to adopt the righteous characteristics of their God.

We see a parallel to these faithful men and women throughout the Gospel Age. There is a counterpart in the lives of the true children of God now to those faithful ones of old. Jesus is our forerunner and our pattern. He was truly righteous—perfect in every respect. There will be righteousness exhibited in our lives if we follow faithfully in his footsteps. The standard of righteousness must be of the highest type in our lives. There is not even to be an appearance of evil. There is to be no evil surmising, and no evil speaking. We must speak only the truth, and that in love.—I Thess. 5:22; I Tim. 6:4; Eph. 4:15,31

## **SUFFERED AFFLICTIONS**

The righteousness of these faithful people of old led directly to their third unique characteristic. They

were “an example of suffering affliction.” (James 5:10) More often than not, righteousness leads directly to affliction. Satan will not tolerate the attempts of any to follow in the paths of righteousness without mounting a strong counterattack.

In Hebrews 11, Paul emphasized this quality of suffering for righteousness’ sake. The cloud of witnesses endured terrible afflictions, “cruel mockings and scourgings, . . . bonds and imprisonments.” They were tortured, stoned, “slain with the sword,” and even “sawn asunder.” (vss. 36,37) However, this group was unique because they suffered these persecutions joyfully, and continued to give honor and glory to God, whom they worshiped and adored.

It was not just that these suffered afflictions. Many persons on the face of this imperfect earth have suffered great affliction, either due to their own wrong actions, through injustice, because of ill health or by accidents. Untold numbers have been stoned into unconsciousness, and death, and many more have died by the sword. Yet, this group of God’s witnesses suffered in a special way—“for righteousness’ sake.”—Matt. 5:10

## **WILLINGNESS TO SUFFER**

There is another great example to be found in the Book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, on a particular occasion, set aside a certain time for the worship of a huge image—which in fact represented himself, and his universal kingdom. Three young Hebrews refused to worship that image, even at the threat of being put to death in a fiery furnace. The reason they gave for their refusal was this: “If it be so, our God whom we serve is

able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not [if we die in the fiery furnace], be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”—Dan. 3:17,18

We see the beauty of their willingness to suffer for doing what was right. Not even the threat of death by the excruciating pain of burning in a furnace of fire could change their decision. They did not worship their God because he would save them, nor because he would make them rich, or keep them healthy. They worshiped and served God because he was the very embodiment of righteousness.

The worldly mind down through the centuries, to our very day, does not understand the principles exemplified by this cloud of witnesses. Neither do they understand Jesus’ followers’ willingness to suffer reproach, disrepute, lack of respect, or their willingness to forego “making their mark,” so to speak, in this world. This is considered irrational behavior in the minds of most. They cannot harmonize suffering and the forfeiting of wealth or position as a result of faithful service to the Heavenly Father, with the concept of a God of goodness and benevolence.

The Apostle Peter comforts and exhorts us with these words: “If ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy are ye.” “If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.” (I Pet. 3:14; 4:16) Let us see that we are careful not to suffer for our own lack of Christian graces, but because of putting into practice these Christlike qualities.



Suffering often makes people impatient, irritable, or bitter. However, suffering had a different effect on the Ancient Worthies, and also on true Christians—an ennobling effect. It crystallizes the righteous character in all the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit of God. When we consider that we are suffering for a particular purpose, to learn specific lessons, then we realize that we are filling up “that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ.” (Col. 1:24) Our afflictions are permitted so that we can serve God more wisely now, but also in the future, as we will have the opportunity to help the rest of the world learn righteousness in Christ’s kingdom.

## **LONGSUFFERING**

James 5:10, partially quoted earlier, also speaks of this cloud of witnesses as “an example . . . of patience.” In the Scriptures, patience often denotes “cheerful endurance,” another important Christlike quality. However, in this instance its meaning is “longsuffering.” Those who made up the cloud of witnesses suffered long and patiently. The model of their longsuffering was God. In describing the essence of his very being to Moses, God said, “The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”—Exod. 34:6,7

In the New Testament the word longsuffering is made up of a combination of two Greek words. The first, *makro*, means “large.” The second is *thumos*, which means “passion.” When we think of the word passion, we think of undying love for a person or a pursuit which one has. This was true concerning

the cloud of witnesses. They had such a “large passion” for God, and for his ways, and for his service, that these things consumed their lives. Whatever they experienced, of happiness or of trial and affliction, made no difference to them. They would not have it any other way.

## **OTHER QUALITIES**

There are other features which round out the description of this company. They believed in God’s promises of a future kingdom of righteousness here on earth, when all will honor and glorify God. Of Abraham it is written that he “looked for a city [government] which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Heb. 11:10) Joseph requested of his children to make certain that his bones would be taken back to the land of promise. (Gen. 50:25; Josh. 24:32) Jacob also believed in God’s promises to bless all the families of the earth.—Gen. 28:13-22

Think of what an extraordinary ambassador John the Baptist was, as he laid down his life bearing witness to the presence of the Messiah. He was one among the cloud of witnesses. (Matt. 11:11) It would be a great honor to be associated with him, or with any of the others. We think of one such as Ruth, the Moabitess, who left her homeland to return to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, seeking a blessing from the Lord. What a blessing she received, as the great-grandmother of King David, through whose line the Messiah eventually came.

These faithful ones of old also worked diligently, as they strived to follow God’s direction for their lives. We recall how Noah worked for decades, building the ark according to the plan given to him by

God. This group of witnesses served as excellent role models for us to follow even today. We need good examples after which to pattern our lives. Early in life our parents are our role models. Later our teachers, our friends, and those with whom we meet in our Christian fellowship become patterns to us. As we mature, we look farther afield to those, past and present, whose lives inspire us to higher goals. Apostles, such as Paul, Peter, John, and others are some of our best examples. Our Lord Jesus, however, is by far the most elevated role model we could take for ourselves, in every respect.

Our observation of the cloud of witnesses shows us what high levels of attainment are possible, with the help and guidance of our Heavenly Father. When we look to our Lord Jesus we realize that he was a perfect man and we, as children of Adam, are fallen human beings. We can never hope to attain the perfection of righteousness which Jesus exemplified. Yet, it is still requisite that we strive to reach toward the goal of perfection. As encouragement, God has provided us with many examples of those who were also fallen human beings, but who showed us what heights of faith and character development can be reached even by sinful man.

## **BY FAITH**

The Apostle Paul begins the eleventh chapter of Hebrews by saying, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," and by the exercise of faith the ancients "obtained a good report." (vss. 1,2) Continuing, he says, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice, . . . by which he obtained witness that he was

righteous.” “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, . . . prepared an ark to the saving of his house.” “By faith Abraham, when he was called . . . went out, not knowing whither he went.” “By faith Moses . . . refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.” “And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel.” “These all, . . . obtained a good report through faith.”—vss. 4,7,8,24,25,32,39

Many similarities exist between the lives of the Ancient Worthies and the faithful followers of Christ during the Gospel Age. Although each group’s experience is a little different, the sacrifices are just as great, the faith exhibited is just as strong, and the afflictions are just as deep. The names are changed, but the results are the same.

Even as Paul was writing his account of those Old Testament heroes, his own history was being enacted—one of unending faithfulness to God and the truth, and service to God’s people. His life was consecrated until death, and the promise of restoration to perfect human life was given up, in exchange for the hope of a glorious spiritual reward. His daily experiences were those of the spirit-begotten.

In a living sense, the names of Paul and many others were being added to the list of faithful witnesses. Paul could have added words such as this: “By faith the brethren of the Early Church obtained a good report. By faith Barnabas offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Ananias and Sapphira. By faith Philip went out to preach, not

knowing whither he was going. By faith Lydia, the seller of purple, received strength to begin an ecclesia in a heathen land. By faith Peter was used to first bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. These all died in the faith. They saw the promises. They were persuaded of them and they confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

Because the reward for following in Christ’s footsteps is so much greater than the prize offered to the Ancient Worthies, we cannot expect the trials and sufferings to be less than they endured. The experiences of the Little Flock of faithful Christians must be as severe, or even surpass in severity, the experiences of the faithful ones of old. Barnabas gave everything to help the poor in the church. (Acts 4:36,37) Peter, Andrew, James and John left their businesses, their homes and families to follow Jesus. (Matt. 4:18-22; Luke 18:28) They suffered worthily for Christ, as they were sent forth to spread the Gospel message. What an increasing cloud of witnesses we can draw from the Early Church.

## **WORTHY EXAMPLES**

We must follow these examples from both the Old and New Testaments, and strive to be worthy of having the same expressions of faithfulness used concerning us, the saints at the end of the Gospel Age. If we have to live, literally or symbolically, in sheepskins and goatskins, or in the mountains and the caves and the deserts, as some of them did, then so be it.—Heb. 11:37,38

As these witnesses were unique, so must we be unique. We believe in the righteous standards of God, and despite our feeble flesh, we are to strive every

day to do his will in our lives. Let nothing shorten our long-lived passion for righteousness, or for serving God. We have committed our lives into his hands until death. Thus, if the eleventh chapter of Hebrews were to be rewritten today, it would contain still more names and stories of faithfulness.

Those who made up the cloud of witnesses described by Paul in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews are worthy examples of faithfulness as they strove to win an earthly inheritance. However, the members of the church class being chosen now are called to a higher, heavenly calling. (Heb. 3:1; I Pet. 1:3,4) They will die in the faith. They will claim the promise of being called the sons of God. (I John 3:1,2) They will work. They will be generous. They will sacrifice. Finally, it will be said of them, as of their Master, that they endured the cross, despised the shame, and are “set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb. 12:2) Our prayer is that this will be said of all who are now faithfully striving to walk in Jesus’ footsteps, encouraged by the great cloud of witnesses God has given us to urge us onward. ■

*“The Lord knoweth them that are his.”*

*—II Tim. 2:19*