

It wasn't that long ago when I brought a friend from Adamson to a Sunday school class much like the one that we had now. It was the old Men's class of Kuya Ponch Valenzuela, who also taught on this same chapter that we are studying now.

After learning that my friend was an athlete he began to speak about how the writers of the Bible especially the ones in the New Testament, used the language of sports and analogies of athletics in expounding spiritual realities. Much like the passage that we are studying now.

It is that lesson on this same chapter that we are studying now that he expounded on this chapter through the analogy of a race where we are all participant runners and all the saints mentioned in chapter 11, are there on the grandstand cheering us on in a race towards our end goal that is the crown of righteousness in Christ that has been promised to all believers in 2nd Timothy 4:8.

Little did I know that years later, I too will be talking about the passage at a Sunday School, which I feel blessed to have been given the blessed privilege to teach now, which I feel falls short in terms of the depth for I am still learning the ropes when it comes to teaching the Word.

Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw of everything that hinders and the sin that easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race that has been marked out for us. **Hebrews 12:1**

"Both the Greeks and the Latins frequently use the term *cloud*, to express a great number of persons or things." (Clarke)¹

The chapter begins with the phrase: 'great cloud of witnesses,' which is a phrase that is closely related to the names and people that were enumerated from Chapter 11, who lived by faith. To Roman Catholics, this phrase pertains to what is called 'The Communion of Saints,' which points towards the union or bond that all the saints (past, present and future), have in their common faith in Christ.

However, if we would look at the passage closely we will see that it is not suggested that these men and women now in heaven are watching us as we run the race, like people seated in a stadium. The word witness does not mean "spectators." Others consider that these witnesses are not witnessing us as we conduct our lives. Instead, they are witnesses to us of faith and endurance. Our English word "martyr" comes directly from the Greek word translated "witness." These people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather they are bearing witness to us that God can see us through. God bore witness to them (Heb. 11:2, 4-5,39) and they are bearing witness now to us.²

What does it mean to 'bear witness,' this is a term that is quite important to the Quakers for to them bearing witness implies that in being a witness, to – let's say the resurrected Lord Jesus, we are called to a life of being a living demonstration of the resurrected life of the Risen Lord.

To become a witness, is to be a living testimony to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, to bear witness is to live out our testimony of faith to the object of our devotion that is Christ.

Hebrews 11, talked about faith and how faith is both a way of *living in the context of* and as a *historical demonstration of*, it is here that we find that the great cloud of witnesses is a living testimony of a people who have lived a life of faith, in God who also calls us to live a life of faith.

For it is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we have been enlisted to a race that has been set before us.

Going deeper we find that we are called to do something, for as we believers we now have a demonstration of the lives that were commended by God because of faith, we in turn are called from what is the *historical demonstration of* into what is real and expected of us that we ourselves ought to bear witness to Christ with our faith. Here we are now called from orthodoxy to orthopraxy, for theology and its themes like Christology is not mere subscription to the doctrinal articulation of who Jesus Christ is, it implies the application of the doctrine of Christ, for Jesus himself in bearing witness to His person and divinity did not just give a statement of faith of who He is, He applied it in terms that can be seen in His earthly ministry.

1 Guzik, David - Hebrews 12 - Reasons to Endure Discouraging Times
<http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/5812.htm>

2 Wiersebe, Warren – Be Confident p. 134-135

For it is in His earthly ministry that Jesus lived a life of loving identification with us in all sorts and conditions of human life. In other words, He practiced the kind of love which is not mere benevolence, wishing people well from a distance, but that love which enters people's situations and makes their plight sympathetically its own. Jesus identified especially with those who experienced the depths: healing the very sick, and the destitute beggars, restoring the dead and dying to life, touching the lepers, befriending the outcasts, freeing the demented from demons of oppression and isolation, attracting the notorious sinners with his freely forgiving love. Finally, he ended up where any of these people could have ended up: a failure, condemned to perish as a criminal, agonizing in pain, deserted by his friends, forsaken by His God. He died the kind of death which symbolized God's verdict on sinful humanity: condemned to perish. He died expressing the tragic meaninglessness of the human fate: 'Why have you forsaken me?' As Jesus died he did not enter those depths where godless and godforsaken human beings can only cry out to God or for God or against God. But He did not enter them on His own account. He did so in consequence of the loving choice of identifying with others which He made in His life and sustained in His death. He died our death, sharing our failure, condemnation, despair and godforsakenness.³

It is in light of this that we are now called to throw everything that hinders, no serious runner or athlete would run with weights, or baggages, that is why they wear aerodynamic clothing in order to run faster, the same could be said of us and our Christian lives, the weights here points towards the things that hinders our progress. They might even be "good things," that may not necessarily be sins but are hindering us as individuals and as a community of faith from being good disciples and witnesses to Jesus Christ, here we can point towards the petty religiosity, that the author of the Epistle have reprimanded his Hebrew audience for in the early chapters.

Sin can hold us back. But there are also things that may not be sin (every weight) but are merely hindrances that can keep us from running effectively the race God has for us. Our choices are not always between right and wrong, but between something that may hinder us and something else that may not. Is there a weight in your life you must lay aside?⁴

Again were are reminded of the reality and power of sin in the life of the believers, which easily entangles us. This points towards the reality that first and foremost even if we are already redeemed in Christ, we are still living in the fallen world of Adam's sin, here we are reminded that sin and its consequences is still present and active in our lives and that if we are not on constant lookout, we will fall into sin and again be captive in bondage to a lifestyle of sin. For we still are part of the sinful world that have become tainted by the consequences of The Fall.

So easily ensnares us: Easily ensnares translates a difficult ancient Greek word (*euperistaton*), which can be translated four ways: "easily avoided," "admired," "ensnaring," or "dangerous." Some sins can be easily avoided, but are not. Some sins are admired, yet must be laid aside. Some sins are ensnaring and thus especially harmful. And some sins are more dangerous than others are. Let us lay them all aside!⁵

For it is in sin that we refuse to live a life in living participation to the life of faith in Christ. In sin, we refuse our community and prefer individual isolation with our bondage, we give up in meeting together in Christ. It is in sin that we lose our feeling assurance of our salvation, we begin to carry the weight of baggages especially in dwelling to a life of 'what ifs'.

The author of Hebrews calls us shed off our baggage and sins - to run with perseverance the race that has been marked out before us. What is needed is endurance, to finish what we have begun in Jesus Christ - a race that is set before us. God has set before us a race. We must run it; and it will involve effort and commitment. Just being passive never runs a race. God wants us to run the race, and finish it right!

In Acts 20:24, Paul pictures himself as a runner who had a race to finish, and nothing would keep Paul from finishing the race with joy. In that passage, Paul speaks of my race - he had his race to run, we have our own - but God calls us to finish it with joy, and that only happens with endurance. Race is the ancient Greek word *agona*, a word used for conflict or struggle of many kinds, and a favorite word of Paul (Philippians 1:30, Colossians 2:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:7).

Endurance is needed to run that race. Endurance translates the ancient Greek word *hupomone*, "which does not mean the patience which sits down and accepts things but the patience which masters them . . . It is a determination, unhurrying and yet undelaying, which goes steadily on and refuses to be deflected."

3 The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England – The Mystery of Salvation p.103

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

(Barclay) ⁶

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. **Hebrews 12:2**

As runners we are called not to miss our mark, our destination – not to miss Christ.

The New American Standard Version translates this beautifully: fixing our eyes on Jesus. We can only run the race as we look to Jesus, and have our eyes locked on to Him. He is our focus, our inspiration, and our example. In the ancient Greek, looking unto Jesus uses a verb that implies a definite looking away from other things and a present looking unto Jesus. We must guard against seeing Jesus as only an example; He was and is so much more. But He also remains the ultimate example of Christian endurance.⁷

For as the great cloud of witnesses, was a demonstration of a life of faith, we are again reminded of the object of our faith and devotion, Jesus Christ, who in the Incarnation became the 'ultimate witness' to a life that is ran in complete obedience to the will of God the Father. But also as a demonstration of a life that is of the Divine that was able to finally free us from the baggage and sins that entangle us, thus enabling us to become finally able as humans to become participant in the divine life of God, that we are called to bear witness to as individuals and as a church.

This is a particularly interesting note for us as a church for we often boast of our Christ-centeredness, of our Christocentric theology here we are called again to bear witness to Christ by following His witness – that is His demonstration of the life that we *His disciples* are also called to follow and live for He is the object of our faith, for He demonstrated to us in explicit terms the life of faith in His redemptive act on the cross which was a demonstration of faithfulness to His calling, motivated by God's love for His fallen creation.

This is what the church is called to bear witness to – to proclaim in our pulpits, to animate in our ministry, as community of faith that gathers around Christ we are called to proclaim this Gospel as testified in the Scriptures and to incarnate this demonstration of devotion in our corporate life of worship, contemplation and discipleship for the Church herself is a revelation of God - who gathers a covenant community of believers that proclaims His Son and His Son's present and future Kingdom.

As individuals, we are called to look unto Jesus, we are called to look upon Christ⁸, by taking seriously His call to carry our crosses and follow Him, furthermore to also be crucified with Christ, and to live our lives in faith for this act of redemption was an act that was done in love for our salvation. Therefore it is only fitting that in view of these mercies of God in Christ we are called to present ourselves – our lives as living sacrifices to God⁹.

Now you may ask why should we keep our eyes fixed on Christ?

The answer is quite simple- we ought to keep our eyes fixed precisely because in His life, death and resurrection He initiated our faith, because our faith is based on Him as the Son of God, on Him as the Christ – the Messiah, the 'seed of the woman, who will crush the serpent's head'¹⁰, as stated in the proto-evangelion, the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecy, therefore the author of our faith. Take note that this is apart from the fact that Christ Himself as the Second Person in the blessed Trinity was also the reason by and for Whom all things were also made.

He is the perfecter of our faith – because in the accomplishment of God's redemptive purposes that came about in His death and resurrection we are set free from the Law, the wages of our sin and from the power of sin and death in our lives. By being able to meet God's demand for holiness in His sinless life in our behalf and by meeting God's demand for justice in His sacrificial death.

Christ on the cross is not only a demonstration of God's love but also a display of His righteousness. Christ's death allowed God to be both just and the justifier of all who believe (Rom. 3:25-26).¹¹ He is the perfecter precisely because He accomplished the task of reconciling sinful man with the Holy God.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Galatians 2:20

⁹ Romans 12:1

¹⁰ Genesis 3:15

¹¹ Shelley, Bruce – Church History in Plain Language p. 79

He is the perfecter of our faith because in our response of faith in Christ we are able to appropriate this redemptive act of love and justice unto ourselves thus justifying us in God's eyes through the merit of the One who is the author and perfecter of our faith.

Jesus is not only the author of our faith; He is the finisher of it also. The idea of He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6) is comforting indeed to these discouraged Christians.¹²

Furthermore, we are called to look into Christ for His was a demonstration of joy in the midst of knowing His ultimate destiny on earth that will climax at the Cross. The passage says that the ultimate redemption of mankind in the cross on Calvary was a 'joy set before Christ.'

Jesus did not regard the cross itself as a joy. But He could look past the horror of the cross to enjoy the joy beyond it. The same mentality will enable these Jewish Christians (and we ourselves) to endure. One of the most prominent elements of the torture of the cross was its extreme shame. Jesus did not welcome this shame - He despised it! - yet He endured through the shame.¹³

Here we find that Christ, in His life as testified to in the divine kenosis – that is when He emptied Himself for us by coming into the world - being found in the appearance of a man and living a life of obedience to the will of His Father an obedience that goes far beyond mere obedience to a superior but an obedience to the will of God who seeks to to redeem us, an obedience unto death – even to the cross.¹⁴

Christ the author and perfecter of our faith has given us the perfect example of obedience – to God's will, to God who marked out the race of faith for us, to God who in Christ is our ultimate goal, that is Christlikeness in the eschaton. This speaks of Jesus' glorification. The same promise of being glorified after our shame (*though in a different sense*) is true for the Christian.¹⁵

Lastly, we are again reminded that Christ, having finished and accomplished the completion of this race ahead of us and for us – is seated now at the right hand of the throne of God, as our Great High Priest, who intercedes on our behalf to God the Father. Christ seated at the right hand of God, whom as our High Priest enables us to approach boldly God's throne of grace¹⁶, in prayer whenever the we get tired and our strength wanes or when temptation and sins hinders us and cause us to stumble.

It is in Christ our Mediator that we can ask for second wind to help us run the race with perseverance.

Also Christ at the right hand of the Father implies also His place in God's kingdom of majesty where all power and authority is given unto Him where in time - every knee will bow down to, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹⁷ Which is a very comforting thing for the Hebrew audience of the Epistle who are disheartened at the time, because they are persecuted for their faith in Christ. It is Christ who sits on the right hand of the throne that we are reminded that in time our vindication will come from Christ will put everything under His judgment.

Thus, the passage here calls us to not only be like the great cloud of witnesses, but also to be reminded of the radical call to discipleship in the witness of Christ's life and redemptive work, but more importantly to faith in Christ who accomplished the race ahead of us so that we may finish the race that has been marked out for us.

It is here that we will see that as Christians we are all enlisted by faith to a race in this life towards Christlikeness, that will come when Christ will ultimately redeem us from the power of sin, in His Second Coming. We are called to run this race and to focus on our prize that is – Christ. But as we run this race we can all testify that we become distracted with so many things like our work, our studies, our everyday problems among other things that at times even our ministries serves more as a distraction that a means of living out our faith.

The passage reminds us that as runners we ought to keep our eyes fixed on the prize that is – Christ, who gave us all an example of a life that has been set with eyes of joy that is fixed on the prize that is our

12 Ibid

13 Ibid

14 Philippians 2:7-8

15 Ibid

16 Hebrews 4:16

17 Philippians 2:10-11

redemption through His death and resurrection.

Finally, the passage calls us to run the race with perseverance, so that ultimately we will finish the race in much the same way as the great cloud of witnesses. Like that of Pastor Andrew Tenefrancia who has gone to finish his race ahead of us. We are called to live our lives in the here and now to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ as we run this race of faith, a race that doesn't give merit to whether we finish it first place or last place for as long as we press on to finish it unto completion when we can honestly say to ourselves the very words of the Apostle Paul in his last letter to Timothy, that we have: "fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith."¹⁸

In the end, we can only testify to the truthfulness of the testimony of the Apostle John when he proclaimed in Revelation 7:10 that: "Salvation, belongs to our God". For the whole emphasis of the Bible lies on salvation being something the God accomplished in history and that belongs to God in His sovereignty.¹⁹

May these words of encouragement be a blessing to us as we press on in running the race that has been marked out for us.

¹⁸ 2 Timothy 4:7

¹⁹ Wright, Chris – Salvation belongs to our God p.180