



# What Cloud? What Witnesses? A Preacher's Exegesis of Hebrews 12:1–2

THOMAS G. LONG

One of the most powerful and most frequently cited images in the New Testament is found in the Letter to the Hebrews. “[W]e are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (12:1). But what exactly does the writer of Hebrews mean by this idea of being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses? The metaphor is so rich that it can easily be taken out of its context and has, in fact, been used as a handy tool in many settings. *Time* magazine once used it as a pun, describing a large gathering of Jehovah’s Witnesses in New York City as a “cloud of witnesses.” “A Cloud of Witnesses” is also the name of a popular Christian blog, the idea being that numerous online contributors mutually generate a cloud of testimony. A congregational cemetery committee used the phrase “surround by a cloud of witnesses” in an argument for maintaining a graveyard that “surrounds” the church building.

But what does this flexible metaphor convey in its first setting? In the Letter to the Hebrews, the image of the “cloud of witnesses” is both less ambiguous and more pointed than these more recent generalized usages would suggest. It functions in very specific ways as a part of a larger pastoral and theological claim made upon the readers (and hearers) of Hebrews. In its original setting, the phrase provides deep motivation for discouraged and weary Christians to endure the strug-

*Hebrews’ “cloud of witnesses” served to encourage dispirited Christians, worn down by the constant struggles of the Christian life. The letter offers them (and us) a robust theological vision, a Christology of hope.*

gles of the Christian life and to come to congregational worship with conviction, confidence, and joy. If we can recover the force and meaning of this “cloud of witnesses” image, it can speak powerfully to the needs, hungers, and doubts of Christians today.

#### THE “PROBLEM” OF HEBREWS

It is not uncommon for preachers today to steer well clear of Hebrews. At first glance the letter appears to be a dense and unapproachable philosophical treatise full of Platonic concepts (for example, “the law has only a shadow of the good things to come,” 10:1) and complex theological ideas (for example, Christ “is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant,” 9:15). New Testament scholar Paul Ellingworth tells of the time when a long and obscure passage from Heb 7 was being read in a certain university chapel service. The reader intoned opaque verse after verse about such ideas as perfection not being “attainable through the levitical priesthood,” about the ancient priest Levi being “in the loins” of Abraham, and about priests “according to the order of Melchizedek.” After going through these twists and turns of the passage, when the reader arrived at verse 15, which begins, “It is even more obvious...,” the congregation of students burst into spontaneous laughter.

---

*For its original audience, the Letter to the Hebrews was not difficult or abstract at all. In fact, Hebrews was designed as a kind of sermon.*

---

It is important to know, though, that for its original audience, the Letter to the Hebrews was not difficult or abstract at all. In fact, Hebrews was designed as a kind of sermon (a “word of exhortation,” 13:22), intended to be read aloud to a congregation at worship. What seem to us now to be convoluted concepts phrased in academic philosophical prose were, for the first audience of Hebrews, actually mostly accessible ideas worded in the popular cultural language of that day. For example, imagine a preacher today talking in a sermon about somebody making a “Freudian slip” or having a “very repressed personality.” Although these concepts have their origin in the technical psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, they have worked their way into the popular mind and would be quite understandable to a typical congregation. Imagine further, however, someone reading this preacher’s sermon in 4000 C.E., when the fine details of Freudian theory will be but a dim historical memory; then ideas like “Freudian slip” and “repressed personality” will be quite obscure, except to scholars who are experts in the “ancient literature” of the twentieth century. Like those future confused readers, we are in the position of reading the sermon of the preacher of Hebrews two millennia after it was preached.

What seems tangled to us, what seems to be language bound up in the remote complexities of Platonic philosophical thought, was, to the congregation that originally heard it, ordinary speech, straight and clear. The Letter to the Hebrews is not an academic essay; it is a Sunday sermon.

If the language of the preacher of Hebrews seems distant from us, however, the problem being addressed by him will not seem far removed. The congregation to which Hebrews is addressed is, quite simply, exhausted. They are tired, not from their daily labor or from the strains of normal life. No, theirs is a fatigue of faith. They are tired of their religion, tired of trying to live the Christian life every day, tired of trying to follow Jesus in every aspect of their lives. As a consequence of their religious fatigue, they have begun to show the familiar symptoms recognizable by almost every congregation today: irregular attendance at worship and inattention to deeds of Christian mercy (10:24–25).

Now, in one respect, the reasons why the Christians who originally heard this sermon, which we call the Letter to the Hebrews, were experiencing fatigue in their faith may seem quite beyond our experience. In our world, it is possible to live an entirely personal and private religious life. We may be Christians—Methodists or Lutherans or Baptists—behind the door of our suburban house, and our neighbors across the street may be Jewish, and the family down the block Muslim, and no one really knows or perhaps even cares about these religious commitments. At the occasional block parties or neighborhood gatherings, the topic of religion usually doesn't come up at all, or if it does, only politely.

This kind of religious anonymity, though, would not have been possible in the ancient world. To become a Christian was a very public act, often setting converts against their own village and kin. To accept the teachings of Christianity was, in effect, to reject the time-honored ways, values, customs, and beliefs of the community, and it would not be unusual for the families and neighbors of new Christian converts to denounce them, verbally abuse them, and shun them. The preacher of Hebrews indicates that when the members of his congregation became “enlightened” (that is, converted to Christianity), they “endured a hard struggle, with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution” (10:32). Even though these collisions with the culture had not (at least so far) resulted in actual bloodshed (12:4), they did have the effect of wearing down the confidence and conviction of these new Christians. After long months and years of trying to live a countercultural Christian life, they were finally beginning to wonder, “What’s the use?” and they were quietly slipping away from the Christian community and their faith commitment.

## OUR FAITH FATIGUE

Even though not many North American Christians, on account of their faith, suffer “a hard struggle, with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution,” serious Christians today do experience a kind of “battle fatigue”

from constantly colliding with the prevailing culture. To put one foot in front of the other and to try to follow Jesus every day means living as a person who seeks to “bear another’s burdens” in a culture of narcissism, being a person who “stores up treasures in heaven” in a consumerist climate, being a person who lives as a peacemaker in a society ready to resort to warfare, torture, or backpack explosives. None of this comes naturally. Being a Christian is not a matter of giving expression to our “true inner selves.” Our “true inner selves” would just as soon engage in road rage, live a life of fat luxury, and tell people in need, “Buzz off. That’s *your* problem.” Being a Christian, in fact, means doing what comes quite unnaturally, taking the strange story of Jesus as our story, taking the risk-filled path of Jesus as our path, swapping our poster reading “When the going gets tough, the tough get going!” for one that says, “Those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it.” There is nothing “natural” at all about the decision to live this way, and trying to do so can easily create the kind of faith fatigue that is the concern of the preacher of Hebrews.

---

*Being a Christian is not a matter of giving expression to our “true inner selves.” Being a Christian, in fact, means doing what comes quite unnaturally, taking the strange story of Jesus as our story.*

---

Strangely, what creates the fatigue is not simply that the Christian life is countercultural. Indeed, as the aging alums of Woodstock would be quick to report, being countercultural, living in ways that cut against the grain, can be exciting and energizing. What creates the fatigue, rather, is living this way over the long haul when there isn’t a whit of evidence that it makes any difference. If the Christian faith is not just a matter of believing in Christ in the secret folds of our hearts, but engaging in certain external, costly, countercultural practices of faith—such as regularly putting our bodies in the pews for worship when we could be playing golf or thumbing lazily through the Sunday paper, giving significant portions of our income to others when we could use that cash to buy another plasma screen TV, volunteering at the homeless shelter when we’re already tired from a day at work, repaying no one evil for evil when we could so easily get even with the jerk at the office who has done us wrong—then doing these things ought to count, ought to make a difference.

But what if the world seems to rock along the same, regardless of our sacrificial Christian living? What if we get ourselves to worship week after week and the anthem often falls flat, the sermon frequently seems a bit boring, and we pass several crowded golf courses and jammed shopping malls on the way to church? What’s the use? What if we pour our money into Bread for the World, but the number of starving people only grows greater? What if we show forgiveness, even Christian love, to the guy in the office who treated us with disregard, only to have him turn away in contempt, yet he turns out to be the one who gets the coveted

promotion? What's the use? When we tell people that we are Christian, a loyal member of such-and-such a church, and they look back not with admiration but with puzzlement, or worse, pity, what's the use?

In John Updike's novel *Rabbit, Run*, the protagonist, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, is temporarily working as a gardener for a wealthy and aged widow, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith's late husband had cultivated an eight-acre garden of rhododendrons, and even though she has no use herself for these plants ("I appreciate the beauty, but I'd rather see alfalfa"), she keeps up the garden out of loyalty to her husband's memory. At one point, she complains to Harry about how sappily romantic some of her neighbors get when her garden bursts into full bloom. She tells Harry that she is particularly irritated by one of her neighbors, a Mrs. Foster, who, every spring, strolls through the rows of flowering rhododendrons and then inevitably exclaims in a chirpy, sweet voice, "My, Mrs. Smith, this must be what Heaven is like!" Mrs. Smith says to Harry,

One year I said to her, I couldn't hold my tongue any longer, I said "Well if I'm driving six miles back and forth to St. John's Episcopal Church every Sunday just to get into another splash of rhodies, I might as well save the mileage because I don't want to go." Now wasn't that a dreadful thing for an old sinner to say?<sup>1</sup>

Each Christian has a reason, a motivation, for "driving back and forth to St. John's Episcopal Church," that is, for living out the commitments of the Christian faith. When those reasons no longer seemed to matter to the congregation addressed by the author of Hebrews, those Christians became disheartened, stopped going to worship, stopped making the sacrifices of the Christian life. So it is in the church today. Millions of Christians have left their beloved churches behind in the last two generations. Most of them do not leave mad or because they have suddenly become atheists. They are just tired and discouraged, and they slip away.

### SEEING VERSUS HEARING

So what does a preacher do when the congregation is discouraged and lackluster in attendance and Christian living? Some preachers might become scolding, spanking the hearers for their lack of commitment. Others might try to put a gloss on church life, jazzing up worship or offering energetic programming, such as aerobics classes or life enrichment opportunities, as an incentive for renewed engagement and increased attendance. Not the author of Hebrews. He has determined that what his hearers need is not shame or gimmicks, but, astoundingly, better theology. Their problem is not that they are bad people or spiritually lazy or not entertained enough by church life, but instead that their Christology is too shallow to inspire endurance; and the preacher of Hebrews sets out on a bold mission: to deepen their understanding of the meaning of Jesus Christ.

He first acknowledges that his hearers are quite correct in their perceptions

<sup>1</sup>John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1960) 119.

that there is no hardcore visible evidence for the truthfulness of the Christian faith. The Christian faith promises that the risen Christ reigns over all things, but when the preacher's congregation looks around, they don't see this victory. All they see is suffering. "[W]e do not yet see everything in subjection" (2:8), admits the preacher. What did they see? Their own suffering, which is exactly, the preacher is eager to say, what people saw when they looked at the life of Jesus. Look at history, look at the evidence, and all that is available to the eyes is the suffering and crucified Jesus. What the preacher is saying here is that, if we base our Christian faith on visible evidence, then we are led inevitably to despair. All that the eye can see is Jesus hanging on a cross, defeated by the powers of the world, and a Christian life that is full of wearying rejection and defeat.

But what if the Christian story is not only a matter of what we can see but also of what we can *hear*? What if the suffering portion of the Christian life is visible, touchable, palpable, but the victory takes place out of sight? Then, what is heard by the ear becomes more important than what is seen by the eye. As the preacher puts it, "We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (2:1). Imagine, for example, that a prisoner of war who was being held in a cruel concentration camp was being marched one day past the guardhouse and managed to overhear a few seconds of a radio broadcast announcing that the war was over, that the enemy had surrendered, and that the captors had been defeated. This prisoner could look around and still see no signs of anything but despair and suffering, but he had heard something life-changing, the word of an as yet unseen victory that radically changes everything about his understanding of reality. So it is, claims the preacher, with the gospel, which is a spoken word that comes into our ears and generates faith in our hearts, a faith that is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1).

#### THE IMAGINATIVE POWER OF THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES

What is the gospel message that generates faith and hope in things not yet visible? What is the spoken word about Jesus that can be heard but not seen? Just this: From the very beginning of this sermon the preacher of Hebrews has been announcing that Jesus traveled a parabola-shaped path in his life and ministry. He is the divine Son, who is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3), who left the heavenly realm and traveled down into the muck and mire of human history in order to rescue lost humanity. He traveled the same stony path as any other human being and "in every respect [was] tested as we are, yet without sin" (4:15), blazing a trail upwards into the presence of God, where he "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3).

Notice that in this parabola-shaped ministry of Jesus only the bottom portion of the "U," the part that protrudes into history, is visible. We cannot see the pre-existent Son in heaven, and we cannot see the victorious Son seated in glory at the right hand of God. We can only see the path of suffering, the Jesus who "for a little

while was made lower than the angels” (2:9), the Jesus who approached his death “with loud cries and tears” (5:7). We can only hear about the full shape of Jesus’ ministry, the full meaning of his mission.

---

*In Hebrews, salvation is a way of life patterned after the life of Jesus, a willingness to follow Jesus on the pathway that he walked. We cannot walk this path on our own.*

---

Jesus traveled the path of suffering not for his own sake, but for ours. It was not just his death on a cross that saved us, but his whole life of obedience and endurance that “made purification for [our] sins” (1:3). In Hebrews, salvation from sin is not a mathematical transaction, not “we are sinners, so Jesus died on the cross and subtracted our sin, and now we are sinless.” Instead, salvation is a way of life patterned after the life of Jesus, a willingness to follow Jesus on the pathway that he walked. We cannot walk this path on our own. Just like our ancestors who rebelled against Moses in the wilderness (3:16–19), we are disobedient people. Even at our ethical best, we are, as the old hymn puts it, “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.”<sup>2</sup> So, because we are lost and rebellious, Jesus entered human history and walked the path that all human beings are called to walk, the path that leads through the challenges of life to the fullness and peace of God, to what Hebrews calls the “sabbath rest” of God (4:9). Because we are lost and cannot find the path on our own, Jesus blazed the trail and is rightly called the “pioneer of our faith” (12:2). Because we cannot travel the path on our own moral strength, even when we know it, Jesus, who traveled it without sin and made it possible for us to follow him, is rightly called the “perfecter of our faith” (12:2).

This path that Jesus traveled is now set before us, and we are called to run it like an ancient footrace. We cannot travel it by ordinary sight; it is too strewn with discouragement, hardship, and suffering, and, if we rely merely on what we can see, we will simply do what the preacher’s congregation has done, what many in the contemporary church have done: lose heart and fall away. The path must be traveled by faith, which anchors its hope in the unseen victory ahead. It should be said that Hebrews’ promise of victory is not a pie-in-the-sky hope. The preacher does not envision the Christian life as a footrace that escapes this troubled world into some mystical heaven. The preacher is quite concerned with the present world and the everyday Christian life—for example, with showing hospitality to strangers and compassion to those who are imprisoned and tortured, with the sanctity of marriage, and with a simple life, free from greed (13:1–6). The victory envisioned by the preacher of Hebrews, the great Sabbath shalom of God, is to arrive at that place where it will be clear that living the Christian life in a world of ambiguity really mattered. In the light of the glory of God it will be evident that the shameful cross

<sup>2</sup>Stanza 3 of “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” by Robert Robinson (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 807).

of Jesus was actually the instrument of redemption. In the light of the glory of God it will be obvious that suffering on behalf of others, forgiving those who have harmed us, and loving the unlovely are not what they appeared in the harsh light of this world—foolishness—but the means by which the world was being gathered into the embrace of God.

We are not the first ones to travel this path that leads to God. The preacher fills the eleventh chapter of Hebrews with rousing accounts of people before us who have run this race by faith—Abel, Noah, Abraham, David, and countless others who traveled the path, desiring “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16). But then the preacher springs a surprise in the sermon. He reveals that this is not an individual footrace, each runner headed for the finish line, but instead a relay race. All those who ran before us in faith ran their portion of the track well, but they didn’t finish the race, they “did not receive what was promised” (11:39). They have instead passed the baton to us, and they have taken their place in the great stadium around the finish line. The race cannot be finished unless we finish it. Those who have run before us cannot, “apart from us, be made perfect” (11:40), and they have now become a “great cloud of witnesses” waiting to see what we will do.

These previous runners are a “cloud” in two ways. First, there are a lot of them. As commentator Harold Attridge says, “The metaphorical use of ‘cloud’ for a mass of people is classical.”<sup>3</sup> But the fact that they are a “cloud,” singular, and not “clouds,” plural, points to their unity of purpose. There are many of them, but they are focused on one task, watching to see whether we will pick up our feet and finish the race.

They are also called “witnesses,” and this conveys the obvious idea that they are now “spectators” to the race. But the Greek noun for “witness” (*martus*) has two other important meanings. First, it means “those who have borne testimony” or “those who have been attested,” and this is true of these heroes of the faith as well. They kept their feet moving even through hardship and struggle, and therefore their very lives were shaped by hope and are testimonies to the promise of God. Second, the word for “witness” is also the word for “martyr,” which points to the suffering they have willingly endured for their faith.<sup>4</sup>

So now the baton is in our hands, and the last leg of the great race lies before us. The stadium is filled with those who have run before, cheering encouragement. We are weary and discouraged; our hands droop and our knees are weak (12:12), but we cannot let that bother us now. We are to keep our eyes on the prize, our eyes on Jesus, “the one who runs ahead...and has already finished the race that is the life of faith.”<sup>5</sup> Like a competitive swimmer who shaves his body to be ready to swim the race swiftly,<sup>6</sup> we are called to put aside all the impediments that would hold us back

<sup>3</sup>Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 354.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 354–355.

<sup>5</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 317.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 316.

and “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (12:2). And when we break the tape and cross the finish line, we will find that we have come to a place that only poetry can describe:

[Y]ou have come to Mount Zion,  
and to the city of the living God,  
the heavenly Jerusalem,  
and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.  
And to the assembly of the firstborn  
who are enrolled in heaven.  
And to God the judge of all,  
And to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,  
And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,  
And to the sprinkled blood that speaks  
a better word than the blood of Abel. (12:22–24) ⊕

*THOMAS G. LONG is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. He is the author of Hebrews in the Interpretation series (1997).*