The Great Cloud of Witnesses

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. 1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 11:39–12:2 ESV)

Hebrews 11 lists some of the giants of the faith who surrendered much and suffered much for the promises of God. However, we are also told something shocking: though they endured tests, trials, and torments they did not achieve the very things they suffered for. They went to their graves without receiving the promises they gave their lives for.

Hebrews 11 concludes by giving us the reason these giants of the faith did not obtain their promises:

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39–40 ESV)

This statement is staggering, and I feel this language may be too familiar for us and thus we miss the weight of the statement.

According to these two verses, Abraham wandered the land, Moses surrendered a position of privilege to be a slave, and Isaiah was sawn in two but God has withheld their reward because of us. Let that sink in for a minute. The reward of unimaginable sacrifices withheld for our sakes.

We tend to think of time in a linear manner, always moving forward, but this speaks to the eternality of reality. In the realm of eternity things are not simply linear. They are deeply interconnected. We think of the past setting the stage for the future, but Hebrews tells us there is a sense in which the past sets the stage for the future, and the future also sets the stage for the past.

Our Own Glory is Connected to the Church

We think rewards are secured by our faithfulness and depend only on the lives we live, but Hebrews enlarges our understanding. Our rewards are not entirely secured by our lives. Our rewards depend in part on the body of Jesus and what follows after us. For
us to ultimately succeed, those who come after us must succeed. In other words, our redemption is not entirely individualistic. We are a part of a body and our success depends in part of the success of the body.

We cannot obtain our full inheritance on our own regardless of how well we run our race because God is after more than individuals, He is after a people. This is how central the church is in the plan of redemption. No one can obtain their inheritance on their own. Our experience of our reward is limited or enlarged by the condition of the body. If the body does not mature, we are all held back. To use an analogy, redemption is not an individual sport it is a team sport. In a team sport, the performance of the weakest member limits the success of the entire team. The greatest player on the team cannot go beyond the limits of the weakest member.

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The author of Hebrews made this plain for us to keep us from falling prey to individualistic thinking. We are naturally motivated to seek our own success and our own redemption. Even as the redeemed, our natural tendency is to secure our own rewards, our own future, and our own inheritance, but the Scripture challenges this thinking.

While there is certainly an element of reward from the Lord for how we loved Him as individuals, our ultimate inheritance is connected to the body. The Bible tells us this so we will be motivated to labor to see the whole church succeed. Sadly, the church has mostly missed this and as a result many labor primarily for their own rewards. However, if we understood just how connected our inheritance is to the church, we would labor for more for the success of the entire body. Once we grasp how deeply connected our own future is to the future of the entire body, our own self-interest will drive us to labor on behalf of the church.

Jesus was the ultimate example of securing His own destiny by laboring for the sake of a people. He was born into a human body exactly like ours, a body Paul describes as in the “likeness of Sinful flesh.” This does not mean that Jesus was sinful in any way; it simply means that He was born with a body that experienced the effects of sin and the fall. He completely shared our human experience which is why He sympathizes with our weakness.

Though Jesus was born in this fallen body, He was destined for a glorified, indestructible. He was born to be the firstborn of a new creation—a glorified humanity. To receive this inheritance, He had a very specific path to glorification—a designed by God for the sake of the church. God designed Jesus’ life so He could not come into His glory unless He made a way for the church to participate in the same glory that

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1 See Romans 8:3.
2 See Hebrews 4:15.
would become His inheritance. In a sense, Jesus’ glory is connected to the glory of the church.

*God designed Jesus’ life so He could not come into His glory unless He made a way for the church to participate in the same glory that would become His inheritance.*

Those Jesus was preeminent above all as God, there is an extent to which His glory was bound to the glory of the body. He could never have come into His glorified body apart from the cross, a process designed to bring the entire church into glory. God reveals something very profound in Jesus’ path to exaltation. *If Jesus’ own glory is connected to the glory of the church, how much more is our glory dependent on the church?*

The only way Jesus could enter His glory was to make a way for the church to join Him in His glory. This is why the Scriptures promise us we will share in His glory:

15 *As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.* (Psalm 17:15 ESV)

2 *Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.* (1 John 3:2 ESV)

21 *who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.* (Philippians 3:21 ESV)

12 *we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.* (1 Thessalonians 2:12 ESV)

14 *To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* (2 Thessalonians 2:14 ESV)

It is nearly impossible to fathom that the Son of God, in His humanity, has connected His glory to the glory of the church. That does not diminish in any way His ultimate superiority as God and as the one perfect human being. However, the fact that His glory is limited in a sense to the glory that can be put on a human frame, speaks to us about His nature and what we are called to.

2 *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* (Hebrews 12:2 ESV)

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Jesus endured His suffering for the joy set before Him, but that joy was not simply His own exaltation and glory. His joy was in the benefit His suffering would have for the church. We are called to live in this same way. Like Jesus, our glory is connected to the body. Like Jesus we are called to live in such a way that we make a way for the church to enter into the very glory we seek for ourselves. Like Jesus, our eternal glory is connected to the glory of the church.

One New Man Across the Generations

This way of thinking is strange to most modern, western cultures in which generations think only of what they can receive from the prior generation. Some traditional cultures, particularly those with a history of ancestor worship, consider the effects of their lives on those who have gone before them. While this worship of ancestors is unbiblical and is often accompanied by an unbiblical pressure to achieve, there is something perhaps more biblical in this way of thinking than in western cultures more oriented around the individual and their success.

We speak often of the “one new man” among the races, but have we recognized the “one new man” across the generations? God is forming a people out of every generation into a single family of affection. In the age to come there will be saints who were a part of a generation that passed through something tremendous—such as the flood, the Exodus, the first century, or the end times—but there will not be a superiority in the generations.

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God is forming a single people and making them mutually dependent on each other because this is the way He is in His own essence. The members are the trinity mutually serve each other and voluntarily depend on each other, and we are called to live in the same way. In a family, the husband is dependent on the wife and the wife dependent on the husband. The church is likened to a body where each part is dependent on another part to function. It is even true of the nations. The nations are dependent on Israel and Israel is dependent on the nations.

This divine plan of interdependence is designed to form a humble people aware of our own deep need for others. One of the great lies of the modern age is that man is in charge of his destiny. To say it another way, the idea that man is essentially self-sustaining. However, God alone is self-sustaining and even He chooses to exist in three persons to demonstrate that, though He is self-existent, His is not ego-centric. Our God is not ego-centric and therefore His church must not be either. It is easy to recognize this part of God’s sovereign design to an extent, but not perceive how

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3 See Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-17; Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16.
committed God is to it. God's commitment to a people who are inter-dependent extends beyond gender, beyond race, beyond nationality, and it event extends beyond time. This is why the saints of the past do not have a secure inheritance without the saints who follow them, and these saints who follow have nothing without the saints who came before.

This understanding is foundational to apostolic thinking. Whether or not Paul wrote the book of Hebrews, Paul understood this. The churches he planted needed him for their success, but he also recognized his success was connected to the outcome of those churches. Paul expressed this in his letter to the church in Thessalonica:

19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? (1 Thessalonians 2:19 ESV)

Paul set his hope on the success of the believers coming behind him. However, Paul is not ego-centric like some man driven for esteem who needs his children to do well for the sake of his own reputation. This is why the believers he had invested in were also his joy and his boast. He was invested in the generations and they were invested in him. He had an eternal way of thinking. He invested in their future because he knew they needed him. This is why he was so bold he could tell them to “imitate him.”5 He knew he had something from the Lord this new church needed to receive from him for their success. However, just as they depended on him for their own success, he knew he also depended on them for his future.

We desperately need this kind of thinking. Perhaps we lack appreciation for those who have gone before because we have not felt the weight of responsibility to live in such a way that we give to the fathers of the faith what they gave to us. We are grateful for the sacrifices of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, John the Baptist, and many others, but are we grateful enough to seek to live as they did so that they would receive the full reward of their labor? Apart from them we cannot be perfect, but apart from us they cannot be perfect.

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Do we feel the pain of the great cloud of witnesses and the dependence they have on our obedience to obtain their full inheritance? They have handed us a gospel but we must continue in it that they may receive their reward.

The Church Will Come to Maturity

4 See also 2 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 2:14-16; 4:1.
5 See 1 Corinthians 1:11; Philippians 3:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9.
Hebrews 11:39-40 is not only a statement, it is also a promise. The fathers are going to get their inheritance. This means that a church will demonstrate the same character, strength, tenacity, commitment, sacrifice, and vision these heroes of the faith possessed. Throughout church history we have seen men and women with the character of the great ones in this chapter. However, Hebrews 11 looks for something more than a few isolated examples of greatness. It hints at something much greater: a mature church with the same character as our fathers who will live the way they lived to see the plan of redemption come to completion.

It’s easy to look at the giants of the faith as impossibly great individuals because of their accomplishments, but they were not superhuman. They were shockingly weak. They failed numerous times. They doubted and feared. They are not untouchable human beings free of the weaknesses that plague us. Therefore, we have the same invitation to greatness if we will walk as they walked.

If we will set our hearts on a kingdom to come and be willing to make decisions on the basis of that kingdom we can also walk in greatness as they did. They were great because they set their hope on a kingdom to come and they persevered, not only in the face of opposition but also in the face of their own failures. Perseverance is more critical to success than strength. This is why in Jesus’ final words in the book of Revelation He exhorted all several churches to perseverance.6

Hebrews 11-12 is ultimately a statement about the end time church. A church will emerge in the earth with the commitment of Abraham to another kingdom, the willingness of Moses to surrender honor in this age for honor in the coming age, and the strength Isaiah had to endure suffering. The church must pass through the same tests the fathers and mothers of the faith did and the cooperation of the church in God’s redemptive plan will result in the church receiving its ultimate inheritance.

This is why the author concluded his exhortation with the opening verses of Hebrews 12:

1Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.  
(Hebrews 12:1–2 ESV)

The conclusion is simple: we are called to live the way our heroes in the Bible did, and we can do it:

6 See Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21. Different translations use different English words (persevere, overcome, conquer) for the word νικάω, but perseverance is the face of opposition is part of the tone of the word.
• We have their example that it is possible in this dark age to live for the age to come. They all demonstrated their weakness in various ways and yet they overcome. If it was possible for them, it is possible for us.

• They laid aside the weight and sin that entangled them. Many walked through great failures, but they persevered and through endurance finished their race successfully. If they persevered through hindrance and sin, so can we.

• We have the ultimate example of Jesus who persevered through the suffering of the cross because of joy. Because He empowers us, we can be willed with joy as He was and overcome as He did. We now have an advocate seated on the throne. Therefore, we have even more grace than the fathers did.

• Their inheritance depends on us. God has joined us and them together into one body across the generations.