

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

By Bob Young

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“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scoring its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Heb 12:1-3

Not long ago, I read an article suggesting that Revelation 19 contains a description of the “Final Battle”, with God coming to rescue us much as the Cavalry rescued those in trouble in the old western movies. Is this really the message of this chapter? Should we be anticipating some great physical battle in which Jesus Christ and his armies fight the forces of evil and overcome them once and for all? What does the Bible say?

Such an interpretation of Revelation 19 contradicts much of what the Bible clearly says in other texts. To use the book of Revelation, which admittedly contains highly figurative and apocalyptic language, to develop a timetable of events which contradict the clear, literal teachings of Scripture is fallacious. There is no great final battle coming in which Jesus and innumerable “returned armies” invade the earthly kingdom of his enemies. Such is a misunderstanding of Revelation and a faulty reading of the text. The Bible does not speak of a great heavenly invasion of the earth in the future. The hope which sustains the Christian is much better than the pre-millennial speculations and doubts that saturate the beliefs of many today.

The Bible clearly places the dead in the hand of God, awaiting the final return of Jesus (1 Thess. 4:10-17). Jesus has not been forced into a waiting game in which Satan has his way on earth, able even to overcome the faithful committed followers of Jesus. The decision as to how one lives one’s life and to whom one declares allegiance is one every person freely makes, with eternal consequences.

Today I am thinking again about those who left our earthly ranks during 2008. They would tell us that the battle against Satan is life-long. They would also tell that all of life moves toward death and judgment (Heb. 9:27). Pre-millennial speculations of saved ones miraculously and instantaneously snatched away, and those who have chosen the paths of evil given a second chance to correct their path have no merit in Scripture. None should find comfort in the hope that a second chance is coming. None should erroneously believe that they can never fall, buoyed by the false teaching that if they are wrong, they will have a second chance anyway.

Paul summarizes the ‘final battle’ in this way: “I have run the race, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:6-8). The promise of a heavenly crown for those declared righteous by the blood of Jesus illuminates each day in the life of a Christian. We eagerly await

his final coming. We live victoriously never quite knowing which day will mark our final battle. Those who finish the course are blessed because their labors provide testimony of the battle they have fought and won (Rev.14:13).

The Psalmist writes these words of comfort: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. O Lord, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains" (Psalm 116:15-16). May we live as God's servants, freed from the chains of sin, victoriously running and finishing the course, so that we may declare with Paul, "I have kept the faith."

The writer of Hebrews wrote to encourage Christians who were thinking of letting go of faith in Christ. Let us likewise use every opportunity to encourage those who are thinking of quitting the faith. Let our message be, "Hang in there." Let us look to the great cloud of witnesses who have preceded us. Our daily reminder is the example of the faith of those who have already lived and died. In tough times, remember others who survived tough times. Trust God, because the cloud of witnesses is proof that it can be done. They are our inspiration to continue onward.

As you consider the cloud of witnesses the Hebrews writers describes, remember another cloud of witnesses, ever expanding. Remember the heart-stirring examples of faith and trust in the lives of those who have lived in faith since the time the book of Hebrews was written. Right up to today the number of souls in your witness cloud is increasing. Every year, in every church, there are those added to the great cloud of witnesses.

In another sense, each of us has our own cloud of witnesses—those we have known, those who are our mentors and models, our examples of faith. Who would you include in your cloud of witnesses? These faithful souls help us continue in faith. And let us so live that someday we will be in someone else's cloud of witnesses!