

The Cloud of Witnesses

¹ 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, ² Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

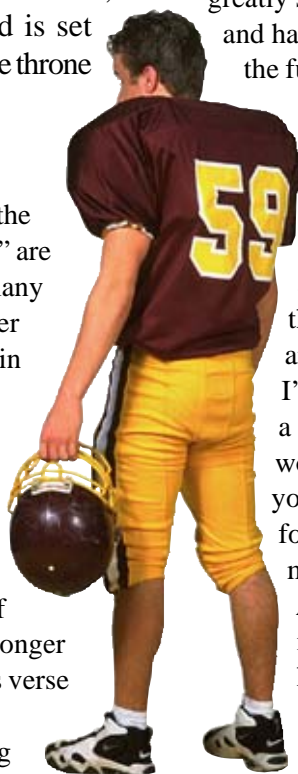
Hebrews 12:1-3

For many years I took the position that the “witnesses” are the Old Testament saints, many of whom are listed in chapter 11, and that they are sitting in the grandstand watching us run the race of life today. I personally couldn’t think of anything more boring for them than to watch us run the Christian race down here the way some of us are running it! And I no longer believe that that is what this verse means.

When my understanding of this verse changed, it cost me the use of a marvelous illustration, but I will pass it on to you because it is a very sentimental story which does make a point.



Years ago a friend invited me to the kickoff luncheon for the Rose Bowl game in Pasadena where I heard a newscaster tell this story. He told of a famous football coach in the East. The coach had a player who was known for two things. The first thing he was noted for was his faithfulness



at football practice. He was the first one out and the last one to leave, but he never could make the team—he just wasn’t quite good enough. The second thing he was famous for was that his father often visited him on campus and they would be seen walking arm in arm across campus, very much engrossed in conversation. Everyone noticed that and thought it was wonderful. Well, one day the coach got a telegram saying that the boy’s father had died. The coach was the one chosen to tell the sad news to the boy, and so he called him in and told him. The boy was

greatly shaken, of course, and had to go home for the funeral. But he was present at the next game, sitting there on the bench. Then he came over to the coach and said, “Coach, this is my fourth and last year, and I’ve never played in a game. I’m wondering if today you could put me in for just a few minutes and let me play.” And so the coach put him in because the boy’s father had just died. To his amazement, the boy turned out to be a star! The coach had never

seen anyone play a better, a more brilliant game, than this boy played—so he never took him out of the game. When the game was over, the coach called the boy off to the side and said to him, “Listen, I’ve never seen anyone play like you played today, but up to today you were the lousiest football player I’ve ever seen. I want an explanation.” And the boy said, “Well, coach, you see, my dad was blind, and this is the first day that he ever saw me play football.” ●●●●●



If this Scripture means that the Old Testament saints who have gone before are sitting in the grandstand watching us run the race, then that story would be a good illustration. However, that interpretation is not accurate at all. The witnesses are not sitting in the grandstand; they are the ones who have already run the race down here. They are the ones who

were down on the racetrack as you and I sat in the grandstand watching them run the race of life in chapter 11. And they ran it by faith. Those who would be called a howling success by the world ran the race by faith. And those who suffered what the world would call miserable defeat, also ran the race by faith. Although they suffered and were slain by the sword, they were just as great heroes. They all witnessed to us. We watched them as we went through chapter 11, and there were many more in the Old Testament, as the writer told us that time would fail him to tell of all of them. They witnessed to us, and encouraged us to run by faith and to live by faith.

Therefore the Christian life is here likened to a Greek race. Christ is the way to God, and along the way the Christian as a soldier is to stand firm, as a believer he is to walk, but as an athlete, he is to run the race. **And one day we are going to fly**, my friend—that will be at the Rapture. We are going to do a little space travel to the New Jerusalem.¹

¹McGee, J. V. 1997, c1981. Thru the Bible commentary. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. Thomas Nelson: Nashville