

A Cloud of Witnesses

Editor's Note: The following article introduces a temporary rubric called A Cloud of Witnesses. The content will include articles on important people and events in the history of the church. At this time we do not know how many articles will be included, since this is a work in progress, but we hope there will be many. The introductory article that follows is written by Joseph Holstege, a student in the Protestant Reformed Seminary and a member of Southeast Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI. We welcome any contributions that our readers would like to make to this series.

Young people, are you ready to die? Do you truly live in the consciousness that the Lord could take you at any moment? When I look back on my days in high school, college, all the way to the present, if I am honest, my answer to this question has always been no. I am still strong and healthy, have aspirations that have not yet been fulfilled, and loved ones whom I do not want to leave. In honesty, would your answer be any different?

Currently most if not all of the readers of *Beacon Lights* live in countries where the world does not yet violently persecute the church of Jesus Christ. However, the day will come when Christians in such countries will again face terrible and violent persecution. Young people often want to talk about this in connection with the last times. When a young people's society comes to finish the book of the Bible it is discussing and must choose a new one, without fail the books of Daniel and Revelation are suggested. We know that the word of God foretells great persecution in the last days: "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matt. 24:21). Further, the older generations in the church have told us how much the world has changed for the worse—how the place for godly, Bible-believing Christians is diminishing in a society that is drunk with the toleration of sin. Many of us wonder, will we see those days? Then, unadvisedly, forgetting the admonition of Jesus to "fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" (Matt. 10:19) we begin to steel ourselves and wonder if we will be able to withstand.

We must not so wonder about these things as to provoke doubt in God's ability to preserve us, for "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:30). But when considering everything that we think we stand to lose (a future spouse? a college degree and successful career? winning a championship game in a soccer tournament?) it is worth considering, am I ready? Ask yourself: if you sat alone, locked in a room, knowing the day when your life would come to an end, would you be OK with that?

The question is difficult, but it is pertinent. Someday, unless we are one of those of whom the scripture says "we shall not all sleep" (1 Cor. 15:51), we will die. The prospect of this death is not a cause of despair for us, but rather is "most desirable and comfortable" (Belgic Confession 37) because we know that we will be gathered into the arms of our heavenly Savior. There are those of our brothers and sisters in the Lord who one instant were riding in a vehicle down the road and the next found themselves in the presence of the Lord. There are those who at one moment were tied to a stake, surrounded by the agony of flames and the jeers of the wicked, and the next found themselves soothed by the Lord of heaven and earth. "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15).

But that does not mean we do not consider the prospect of our own eventual death with some fright. We do not like pain, nor do we relish the thought of leaving behind our friends and loved ones in the church. Concerning this natural fright that we face, the scriptures encourage us by pointing to the examples of saints who have gone before us. You are familiar with the passage that tells us of the "heroes of faith" (Heb. 11). In that passage we read of many saints of the Old Testament who lived by faith in the promise of God, who now reside in the heavenly home to which we look forward. They have all died, some in peace surrounded by their loved ones, but others in great persecutions and tribulations. "They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth" (Heb. 11:37–38).

The next chapter of Hebrews refers to these men and women as a "great cloud of witnesses" who compass us about:

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. 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. (Heb. 12:1–2)

The idea is of a great multitude of men and women in a crowd cheering us on in the race we are running. Do not misunderstand: I am not suggesting that the saints of old look down on us in our day-to-day lives, as the Roman Catholics conceive. Neither is this true of our loved ones who have gone before us, as the popular misconception would have it. Rather, we are to see the "heroes of faith" in much the same way as a marathon runner sees the people crowding along the way and at the finish line. Those people shout encouragements to the runner. They tell him to keep going, for the prize is within reach. This is the power of the recorded lives of the saints who have passed before us. It does us no good if they simply look on us and have a concern for our well-being from heaven. What does us good is the record of their faithful witness in God's infallible word. Having lived out of God's gracious gift of faith, these men and women persevered through great difficulty and trial. They looked to Jesus, who was the author and finisher of their faith. Their lives are an encouragement unto us, for the same reality is true for us. We will face trials, difficulties, and death. But looking to Jesus, we will persevere through these things and be gathered into the arms of our Lord.

Young people, I earnestly encourage you to consider diligently the lives of the saints who have gone before you—both the lives of those recorded for us in scripture and those who have walked since then throughout the history of the church. It is good for us to consider the lives of previous saints who have faced severe trials and revealed the grace of God in them, preserving them. It is good for us to speak to older members of the church, our parents and grandparents, in order to learn how God preserved and sustained them in their various trials. Also it is good for us to read of the saints who lived in the early church or during the time of the Reformation, who were publicly and unjustly murdered and yet persevered through death by

the grace of God. You and I are not the first to face dark and dreary trials, and we will not be the last. To that end, this article is introductory to a series that will consider some of the individuals in the "great cloud of witnesses," whose lives stand as testimonies to the power of faith. It is the sincere hope of *Beacon Lights* and of the present author that this series will be a source of encouragement to you as you run your race, "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of your faith."