

The Cloud of Witnesses

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, May 26, 2024
PASSAGES	Hebrews 11; Hebrews 12; Genesis 22
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:09:58 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The great cloud of witnesses is not a grandstand of the dead watching to see whether you behave. It is a courtroom, and every name in Hebrews 11 takes the stand to testify to the same thing the whole letter has been arguing: God keeps his word. That is why you can hold on to him long before you can see the payout.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The word behind “witness” is the word behind *martyr*. A martyr dies for what they testify to, not for what they watched. The cloud is testifying, not spectating.
- ◆ Hebrews has one running argument — there is one gospel, it is solid because Christ is solid, so do not depart from it. Chapter eleven is that argument with the witnesses called.
- ◆ The Old Testament is not a big book of hero stories with a moral attached. Israel’s God is the protagonist, and every other character is a witness to him.
- ◆ Faith is assurance about things still hoped for and conviction about things not yet seen. Most of these people acted before any confirmation arrived.
- ◆ Wanting a reward is not a flaw. Wanting the wrong reward, from the wrong hand, is.
- ◆ Samson is in the list, and he was not admirable. He simply presumed God would be who God said he was — and God was.
- ◆ Not everyone escaped the sword. The ones who were tortured, mocked and killed testify to the same verdict as the ones who conquered kingdoms.

- ◆ We are not the heroes of this story, and that is the encouragement, not the demotion. He is the unshakable one.

► 1:09:58

Memorial Day weekend, a thinner room than usual, and the children still in the service. Matt explained that rhythm before he explained anything else. On a low-attendance Sunday it is harder to staff childcare — but there is a better reason than logistics. “We want to disciple our kids in the way of worship.” They do not have an ornamental function. They are not there to be looked at; they are there, small as they are, to present themselves to the Lord.

1. Where the letter has been going

► 1:11:31

Hope has been working through Hebrews, and Matt wanted the shape of the letter in the room before he read a word of the eleventh chapter. Hebrews has been saying one thing in a dozen ways: there is only one gospel, it is rock solid and true because Christ is rock solid and true, and therefore do not depart from it. The encouragements and the warnings both push the same direction. Keep going. Keep trusting him. He is trustworthy.

2. A witness is someone who testifies

► 1:13:26

Most of us picture the cloud of witnesses as a stadium — a growing crowd of the dead watching from beyond the grave, and the encouragement is that they are looking. Matt let that reading stand as possible and then argued it is not the point. The word can mean someone looking, but it also means someone giving evidence. It is the word our English *martyr* comes from. “A martyr is someone who has been killed because of their testimony, not because they looked at the wrong person and died.”

So picture a courtroom instead. These are expert witnesses, called one at a time, and their testimony all lines up: he is worth steadfast trust, and every difficulty was worth it because he is worth it. Which is what the room had already been doing all morning. Mark Thomas had stood at the microphone and told the church about forty years of rebellion and a God who kept reaching down and pulling him back out. That is a witness in the Hebrews sense.

3. Not a book of hero stories

► 1:15:01

Matt owned this failure as a preacher's failure first. Working through the Old Testament, it is easy to slip into treating it as a series of hero stories — find the one good thing this strange man did, and tell people to be like him. But the Book of Judges, which Hope worked through a few years back, is a decline narrative: it starts high and ends low, a form of tragedy. The judges get progressively more self-absorbed, faithless and idolatrous, each one reflecting Israel's spiritual condition, and the final chapters are genuinely shocking. That is not a set of examples to copy.

Who, then, is the protagonist of the Bible? Israel's God. He is the one we root for — which also means we are not rooting for one nation over another as though God were partisan. He wanted his name and his greatness known by every people on earth. And there is a reason the stories that move us most are about a lone warrior who faces death and gets the bride: “reality itself can't help but echo the story of Christ and his bride.”

4. Assurance and conviction

► 1:18:24

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

HEBREWS 11:1 ↗

This is what the author is trying to produce in his readers, and it is why the chapter still lands. Walking with Christ does not reliably make your life more luxurious, and there will be seasons when following him is precisely what costs you. Matt put the honest question plainly: why keep going, when I cannot see his return, cannot see his kingdom, and holding on has brought trouble? Because faith is assurance about what is still hoped for and conviction about what cannot yet be seen.

He paused on the commendation the ancients received, and on reward. Wanting a reward is not greed — Jesus spoke about it as a no-brainer, that your reward in heaven is great. The question is which reward and whose hand it comes from. And the theme is already built into creation itself: what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. Trusting what we cannot see is not an odd demand made of believers; it is how everything already works.

5. The witnesses are called

► 1:20:48

Abel gets a few lines and dies young, and what still speaks is his faith — it is his faith that takes the stand. With Enoch the argument runs backwards: we know he pleased God, and without faith it is impossible to please him, so we know he had faith. Then Noah, who is the theme in one man:

“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.”

HEBREWS 11:7 ↗

It was not raining. Imagine the size of that undertaking with no visible reason for it beyond what God had said. Abraham went out not knowing where he was going, and Matt noted that obedience in the dark is one of God’s favorite love languages. Abraham did see favor — cattle, a son — but the thing he was actually looking at was a city with foundations whose designer and builder is God. Sarah “considered him faithful who had promised,” which is testimony, not spectating: I trusted God with something impossible, and I had no natural reason to.

6. They were all after the same country

► 1:26:24

“These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth... But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

HEBREWS 11:13–16 ↗

Some of them got a foretaste. None of them got the thing itself, because the most precious inheritance available is God himself. Matt named the practical use of that: when faith does not build the checking account, or hand you friends, or make you healthier and younger — the sort of thing the world advertises, and the sort of thing a version of the gospel will sometimes advertise too — this is what you are actually longing for. And the world around you will rarely say amen to that.

7. Abraham, Isaac, and who is playing the father

► 1:28:13

Hebrews 11:17–19 says Abraham considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead — and the wording on the mountain hints at exactly that confidence:

“the boy and I will go over there and worship and come again to you.”

Matt drew out something easy to miss. Isaac’s own story is oddly unmemorable because he repeats his father — the same episode with Abimelech and his wife, the same wells redug and given the same names. There is a foreshadowing in that: a promised, miraculous son who does only what he sees his father doing. Which puts Abraham, in this scene, in the role of the Father. That is a brutal part to be handed. God stopped him and provided a substitute, because he would not ask that of us — and then did it himself.

The line continues: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, each blessing what they would not live to see. Joseph gave instructions about his bones because he was confident of a deliverance a very long time after his death.

8. Moses, and the ones who never got a receipt

► 1:31:39

Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter and counted the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt. Matt headed off the objection that this is anachronistic — Christ is the God of the Old Testament made flesh, so aligning with God’s purposes at cost is bearing his reproach. Then the phrase that holds the whole chapter together: “he endured as seeing him who is invisible.” Passover, the Red Sea, Jericho and Rahab follow in a rush.

9. And then Samson

► 1:34:07

Matt enjoyed the author’s trick in Hebrews 11:32 — time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah — and then he names them anyway. But he wanted Samson pressed on, because Samson is where the hero reading collapses. Samson delivered Israel largely out of self-interest, over a girl or because he was angry, and he seems to have simply assumed the strength would be there. “That’s like a version of faith. This is really bizarre and twisted version of faith — but he just took God for granted.” Held up as an example of character? No. Held up as evidence that God is who he says he is, even when the person banking on it is, in Matt’s word, scummy? Yes. “We’re kind of weird and deviant and creepy and idolatrous kinds of people, but he is solid.”

10. The witnesses who did not escape the sword

► 1:35:50

The chapter turns hard, and Matt refused to soften it. Some conquered kingdoms and escaped the edge of the sword. Some did not.

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword... of whom the world was not worthy.”

HEBREWS 11:35-38 ↗

Where we see rescue, we see God’s favor. Where we do not, we see their testimony holding to the end — which is the same testimony. And then the strangest line in the chapter:

“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

HEBREWS 11:39-40 ↗

11. Therefore, run

► 1:37:13

“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, 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 12:1-2 ↗

The verdict has been returned across ages, languages and cultures, over and over: God is trustworthy, he keeps his word, and you can cling to what he has promised because he is true. Jesus is the trustworthy part of the whole plan — not the founder only, but the perfecter.

► 1:40:30

And the cloud is not closed. It is joined by the witness in your small group, in your family, in the row behind you — the people who will say, yes, God does seem to be the faithful one in this relationship. We are not being recruited into a story where we are the main characters. We stray, we stumble, we do what we know we should not; Matt was not excusing it, just naming it. The point is that he is the steady one, the unshakable one, and as Christ is formed in us we see it more clearly. “Keep going even through the pain, because he is worth it. Everything he said is true. You can bet your life on it — although I hope you don’t get sawn in half.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Hebrews 11:1](#)
- [Matthew 5:12](#)
- [Hebrews 11:3](#)
- [Hebrews 11:4](#)
- [Hebrews 11:5–6](#)
- [Hebrews 11:7](#)
- [Hebrews 11:8–10](#)
- [Hebrews 11:11–12](#)
- [Hebrews 11:13–16](#)
- [Hebrews 11:17–19](#)
- [Genesis 22:5](#)
- [Hebrews 11:20–22](#)
- [Hebrews 11:23–28](#)
- [Hebrews 11:29–31](#)
- [Hebrews 11:32](#)
- [Hebrews 11:35–38](#)
- [Hebrews 11:39–40](#)
- [Hebrews 12:1–2](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Have you read the cloud of witnesses as a crowd watching you, or as witnesses testifying about God? What changes if it is the second one?
2. Where have you been reading the Old Testament for heroes to imitate rather than for what it says about God?
3. Matt said several of these people acted with no confirmation on the front end. Where are you being asked to do something before the confirmation comes?
4. Samson presumed on God and God was still faithful. Does that comfort you or unsettle you, and why?
5. What weight or entangling sin are you carrying into this week, and what would laying it aside actually look like by next Sunday?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_MoXSLqQLk&t=4198s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.