

The Great Cloud of Witnesses Frances Taylor Gench

A Bible study on Hebrews 12

The Letter to the Hebrews will provide the theme for the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) when it meets in Birmingham. This is highly appropriate, for as Fred Craddock notes, in the New Testament “there is no other document that represents the mounting of so strong an effort by a pastor to save a church.”¹

Recently, I heard Craddock observe, in his inimitable way, that different letters in the New Testament were no doubt sent with different degrees of haste to those who received them. He says that when Paul, for example, wrote his angry letter to the church at Corinth, he probably let it sit on the desk for a few days. (“It’s one thing to write a letter like that—it’s another thing to send it.”) First Thessalonians consists almost entirely of prayers, songs, confessions, and words of praise, and Paul probably said to the postal carrier when he mailed that one, “Just as long as it gets there by Sunday—they’ll want to use it.” The letter to Jude? “There’s no telling what the writer thought, but if it never got there, it wouldn’t hurt!” And Hebrews: “very heavy, very ponderous—put it on the scales and it took three extra stamps.” But Craddock says even though it cost a lot, stamped by the writer on the outside of the folder were the words, “Special delivery, Overnight Mail, Federal Express, Get it There!”

I think Craddock is right about that, and as soon as you open Hebrews, you know why. It is filled with expressions of urgency: “Hold on. Don’t shrink back. Don’t despair. Don’t give up. Lift your drooping hands and knees.” The writer of Hebrews is trying to revive a church, and in the New Testament there is indeed “no other document that represents the mounting of so strong an effort by a pastor to save a church—to restore a church to its joy, love, and delight in service of God.”²

Now what is the problem? What is wrong with the church to which this very urgent, overnight mail is addressed? A close reading of the letter suggests that the Christians addressed by Hebrews are *tired, exhausted, bone-weary*. As commentator Tom Long observes, they are “tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”³

A number of clues in the letter point to the fact that the believers being addressed have grown weary in the Christian way and are on the verge of abandoning their Christian vocation:

“We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, *so that we do not drift away from it*. . . . How can we escape *if we neglect so great a salvation?*” (2:1-3)

“Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that *turns away* from the living God” (3:12).

“Therefore let us go on towards perfection For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have *fallen away*” (6:1-6).

“ . . . we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become *sluggish*, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:11-12).

“*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering*, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some*, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (10:23-25).

“Therefore *lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees*” (12:12).
Enthusiasm has faded. Faith commitment is on the wane. Many have stopped attending the Christian assembly altogether. Moreover, they have ceased to grow in their understanding of the Christian faith:

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become *dull in understanding*. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need *milk, not solid food*. . . . (5:11-14).

Clearly, they are in a state of arrested development as Christians!

One would not have expected this to be the case, for their earlier history was clearly exemplary:

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. *Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours*; it brings a great reward. For you need *endurance*, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. (10:32-36)

New threats of persecution on the horizon (hinted at in chapters 12 and 13) may well have given rise to the community’s weariness and discouragement and to the temptation to “drift away” from Christian faith. Whatever may have occasioned their lethargy, it is clear that Hebrews addresses fatigued and beleaguered Christians who suffer from what

has aptly been described as “tired blood.”⁴ They have grown weary in the Christian way and are on the verge of abandoning Christian faith.

The writer of Hebrews thus clearly faces a real and urgent pastoral problem. So what does he prescribe for this malady? A heavy dose of theological reflection! As Tom Long observes, “faced with the pastoral problem of spiritual weariness, the author is bold enough, maybe even brash enough, to think that Christology and preaching are the answers. The Preacher does not appeal to improved group dynamics, conflict management techniques, reorganization of mission structures, or snappy worship services. Rather, he preaches . . . in complex theological terms about the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ.”⁵ He dives deep. Even though in their state of arrested development as Christians, they seem ready only for “milk,” “solid food” is exactly what they get—a heavy dose of theological reflection! People in this condition need much more than a pep talk. What they need is a deepened understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ—the one through whom God has spoken a sure and incomparable word, and through whom are available rich resources for the life of faith. Moreover, Hebrews goes beyond “the basic teaching about Christ” (6:1) to instruct its readers with a creative reinterpretation of the traditions about Jesus. By means of innovative, intellectually challenging, solid food indeed, Hebrews aims to rekindle the people’s vision, for if they can catch a glimpse of what God has accomplished and made available in him, there would be no thought of drifting from the faith.

The major purpose of Hebrews is thus to encourage, strengthen, and motivate its readers—to call them to faithfulness. The author seeks to achieve this purpose by means of two central themes: *priesthood* and *pilgrimage*. First, Hebrews sets forth a new presentation of Jesus as High Priest and enthroned Son, through whom faithful Christians have direct access to God. Hebrews is the only book in the New Testament that explores the significance of Jesus’ work by means of the priestly image. Like the priests of old, Jesus is a mediator between the human and divine realms, a boundary-crosser who opens access to the holy. He cleanses our conscience, effectively removes our sin, and intercedes for us before the throne of grace. His completed work as high priest brings us into the very presence of God and makes possible our own lives of covenant faithfulness.

Second, the theme of pilgrimage is also central, for in his priestly, boundary-crossing role, Jesus is also a trailblazer, a pioneer, who leads us to faith’s destination, drawing us toward our home with God. Thus, Christians are urged to look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:2) and “to run with perseverance the race that is set before” them (12:1). Hebrews envisions Christian life as a journey, in which we follow Christ’s example of faithful service and live as he did, even in the midst of persecution. Christians are to be a pilgrim people, on the move, and sojourners in this world, who seek their home in the city “whose architect and builder is God” (11:10). Thus, Hebrews urges its readers to “get the lead out,” to keep moving, to get on with their marching toward the goal. The author is anxious to ensure that his weary pilgrims reach the Promised Land. By rekindling their vision of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ, and by reminding them of the great personal resources available to them through Jesus’

completed work, the author of Hebrews seeks to rejuvenate weary readers of every age for the pilgrimage of faith.

The theme of pilgrimage, in particular, bears directly on the theme chosen for the 217th General Assembly, “so great a cloud of witnesses,” which appears in chapter 12 of the Letter to the Hebrews. Chapter 12 is closely linked to the chapter that precedes it, Hebrews’ most famous chapter, which provides an extended excursus on the power of faith. That power is evident in the lives of the saints of preceding generations, and their example will surely inspire and encourage weary Christians. This is one of the ways in which the author seeks to motivate his readers: by calling to their remembrance this “great cloud of witnesses” whose lives bear testimony to the power of faith.

Hebrews speaks of “faith” more than any other book in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11 alone, the word faith appears twenty-four times. However, Hebrews highlights a different aspect of it than do other New Testament witnesses. The apostle Paul, for example, speaks of faith as a passive reality: It is essentially trusting acceptance of Christ’s saving work as a gift from God. What Hebrews intends by “faith,” however, is closer in meaning to “faithfulness.” It speaks of faith as active in obedience. It is that characteristic of the Christian life that enables one both to endure—to persevere—even in the midst of difficult circumstances and also to step out into the unknown with courage and to live in a risky and vigorous way.

Hebrews captures, in its most familiar line, the characteristic of faith that empowers this kind of living: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Faith, in other words, means that there is more to this world than meets the eye! It means that this world of value and power are on its way out, for God is bringing into being a new world according to the person and passion of Jesus Christ. Faith enables believers to live by a vision of the reality of God and God’s purposes for the earth, a vision that is not yet present or visible to the eye. It empowers believers to move into the future with trust and confidence, knowing that the future belongs to God, and to invest themselves at those points where God’s future may be struggling toward realization now, confident that God’s redemptive purpose in the world will not fail to be achieved despite all appearances to the contrary.

To inspire and encourage its readers, Hebrews brings forth a parade of saints who lived by just this kind of faith-vision in Hebrews 11. The chapter ends, however, with an astonishing affirmation: We are one with the saints in waiting for the final realization of God’s saving purposes. And because Jesus Christ and the new covenant established in his death represent the fulfillment of God’s purposes, Hebrews maintains that the saints of preceding generations will “not, apart from us” who believe in Christ, “be made perfect” (11:40).

Thus, the parade concludes in a stadium in 12:1-2, where faint-hearted Christians find themselves “surrounded” by this great “cloud of witnesses” to whom they are connected by faith. Those who have already run now pass off the baton for the last leg of the race and gather in the bleachers to encourage the next generations of believers to run well.

Indeed, there is a striking shift between Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12 and a surprising climax to Hebrews' extended parade: Instead of witnessing the parade of saints, we now find their eyes fixed on us! What might this contribute to our prayerful preparation for the 217th General Assembly?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Read Hebrews 12:1-17. What strikes you most about this text? What most captures your attention? What questions does it raise for you?

What key words, images, or metaphors are employed?

To what extent do you identify with the urgent pastoral problem addressed by the Letter to the Hebrews—that of “tired blood”? How does Hebrews 12 reframe your reflection on that reality?

Hebrews 12:3-17 may not be as familiar to you as Hebrews 12:1-2. Indeed, the lectionary omits vv. 3-17 in its schedule of readings from Hebrews. What do you think of this omission? What do these verses contribute to your reflection on the great cloud of witnesses and the race that lies before us?

What do you learn about Jesus from this text? What claims are made about him?

What do you learn about the nature of the race or pilgrimage before us?

Hebrews has been called “the epistle of sufferers,” for it is distinguished by the attention that it gives both to the sufferings of Jesus and to the sufferings of God’s people. How would you summarize what this text affirms about suffering? Do you find it tenable?

What connections do you discern between this text and your own experience of the Christian life? Of life together in your local congregation, your presbytery, or the denomination?

What connections do you discern between this text and the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

When you think of the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on, who are those witnesses that most inspire you, motivating you to endure and to stay in the race?

How would you summarize what Hebrews 12 and “the great cloud of witnesses” contribute to this period of time after the 217th General Assembly?

¹ Fred B. Craddock, "Cloud of Witnesses" (Hebrews 12, May 25, 1985) in *Recorded Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Atlanta: CST Media, c.1986).

² Craddock, *ibid.*

³ Thomas G. Long, "Hebrews," *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 3.

⁴ William G. Johnsson, "Hebrews," *Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 3.

⁵ Long, p. 3.