

Who's Watching?

Removing the Cloud of Witnesses from the Amphitheater

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*We're pilgrims on a journey of a narrow road,
And those who've gone before us line the way.
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary,
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace.*

*Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
Let us run the race not only for the prize.
But as those who've gone before us,
Let us leave to those behind us,
A heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives.¹*

A cloud of witnesses

"I'm sure Mother is pleased," a woman said to her sisters after they finished settling their Mother's estate. They were discussing how some of the inheritance had been distributed, and in particular the donation of a sizeable gift toward the support of a great-grandson who was headed to a primitive mission field.

Mother *is* pleased? Behind the daughter's statement was the assumption that her mother, even though deceased, was aware of how her earthly possessions had been handled. Such an assumption is widely held among Christians. Those who have died in the faith have been received into God's presence and are now privileged to watch their loved ones who are still "pilgrims on the narrow road."

¹ Jon Mohr, "Find Us Faithful" (Birdwing Music, 1987).

If challenged on the subject, many Christians would have difficulty explaining where that view originated. On the other hand, many evangelicals—from scholar to pastor to pew-sitter—believe that such a view is taught in Scripture. The “cloud of witnesses” of Heb. 12:1, they say, is composed of believers who have gone before us and now form, as it were, a throng of spectators, cheering us on as we run our spiritual race. Denying the Catholic doctrine of the intercession of the saints, they nevertheless share the Catholic view that the dead in heaven can watch the activities of people still on earth. This belief, however, comes not from the Scriptures but from paganism. The resulting syncretism easily can—and does—cross over into a belief that the dead are not only watching but also influencing the living.

A matter of suggestion

According to this increasingly popular view, the saints of Hebrews 11 become in Chapter 12 spectators in a metaphorical amphitheater, providing encouragement to those who are still running the race. Several words within the text itself suggest such an interpretation.

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.²

The word *witnesses* [*marture*"] signifies those who watch an event and can later testify about it. They form a *cloud*, suggesting that the witnesses are looking down toward earth. At the same time, the witnesses *surround* us while we run the race, suggesting the amphitheater built for athletic contests. Finally, the context of encouragement summons up the imagery of a crowd of cheering fans “forever swirling around us”³ who are rooting for the runners.

² Heb. 12:1 (NIV), italics added. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

³ Andrew D. Kinsey, “A Great Cloud of Witnesses” (Vincennes, IN: Community United Methodist Church, Nov. 1, 1998), Nov. 11, 2000, <<http://www.community-umc.org/sermons/s110198.htm>>.

Although some variations exist in the explanations of Heb. 12:1, these form the common elements. A key term in the justification of this interpretation is the word *suggest*. The imagery *suggests* the interpretation.

The majority of commentaries agree with this explanation. Henry Alford, in his extensive commentary on the Greek New Testament, insists that the cloud of witnesses must be onlookers.⁴ Interpreting *marture*“ otherwise would miss the point, he claims, although he admits, quoting Chrysostom, that the Greek expositors in general did not interpret it this way. *Cloud* suggests that the witnesses are literally looking down from heaven. Anything short of this is too “tame.”⁵

Leon Morris, in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, notes the debate over the word *witnesses*. It is not a question of identity but a question of function. Are they witnesses to the faith, or are they spectators of the race? Morris admits that normally *martur* is used in the former sense, and “it is doubtful whether it ever means simply ‘a spectator.’ Still . . . the imagery of the present passage favors it.”⁶

Questionable assumptions

A few disagree, and with good reason. The imagery only *suggests*; it does not assert. No amphitheater is mentioned in the context, and nothing is said explicitly about the dead watching us. Much has been read into the text. In fact, most elements of this interpretation can be challenged.

In what sense do the saints of Hebrews 11 act as witnesses? In the ordinary meaning of the word, a witness is a spectator, observing an event first-hand. A witness also gives testimony.

⁴ Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, vol. 4 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 234.

⁵ *Ibid*, 235.

The relationship between these two meanings is not accidental. Only someone who has personally known of the event being attested can give legitimate testimony. The author of Hebrews has already used *martur* in this double sense in 10:28: “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses [*martusin*].”⁷ The witnesses tell what they know so that the truth might be verified.

A passive form of *marturew* is used in 11:2: “This [faith] is what the ancients were commended [*ejmarturhqhsan*] for.” God witnessed what the ancients had done and gave testimony concerning it; by implication, this testimony was a commendation. Similarly, in 11:4 “[Abel] . . . was commended [*ejmarturhqh*] as a righteous man when God spoke well [*marturouhto*] of his offerings.” What was implicit in verse 2 became explicit in verse 4: God saw, and God spoke. How do we know what he spoke? It is written in the pages of Scripture.

Verse four continues: “And by faith [Abel] still speaks [*lalei*], even though he is dead.” Abel, one of the witnesses [*marturwn*] of 12:1, is *speaking*—he is giving testimony. He and the rest are testifying about their lives lived in faith. Where do they speak? In the pages of Scripture.

In the same way, God saw and spoke well of others. Enoch “was commended [*memarturhtai*] as one who pleased God” (11:5). All whom the author mentions were “commended [*marturhqente*]” for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised” (11:39). God observes and gives testimony concerning these people from the past. Where are these testimonies? They are written in Scripture for us who are now running the race.

With the word *therefore* [*toigarouh*] in 12:1, the author links the need for us to endure—a theme begun in 10:19—with examples of those who endured successfully. The

⁶ Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin, Zondervan NIV Bible Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989-1997). CD-ROM.

⁷ Lit., “died under two or three witnesses” [*epilvdusih h] trisih martusin apoqhēkei*].

context never suggests that these persons are now observing us. Instead, they are giving testimony through the pages of Scripture. The one who is observing and commending is God.

The suggestion of an amphitheater is also highly questionable. It is true that *ajgwh*⁸ can refer either to a race or to the place where the race is run. However, in Heb. 12:1, the focus is on what is laid out for the runner, not on the sidelines.

In addition, the amphitheater is part of Greek and Roman culture, not Jewish culture. Certainly the original readers were familiar with the games. Greek athletic contests began influencing Jewish society at the time of the Seleucids, but “after the success of the Maccabean rising Gr[ee]k games fell into disrepute among the Jewish population of Pal[estine], and were thenceforth regarded with suspicion by all strict religionists.”⁹ Josephus records the tragic events that occurred when Herod introduced Greek games into Palestine:

Herod [the Great] revolted from the laws of his country, and corrupted their ancient constitution . . . by which means we became guilty of great wickedness . . . for, in the first place, he appointed solemn games to be celebrated every fifth year, in honour of Caesar, and built a theatre at Jerusalem, as also a very great amphitheatre in the plain . . . Both of them were indeed costly works, but opposite to the Jewish customs; for we have had no such shows delivered down to us as fit to be used or exhibited by us. . . . [The] principal persons that were the most eminent in these sorts of exercises, were gotten together, for there were very great rewards for victory proposed, not only to those that performed their exercises naked, but to those that played the musicians also. . . . [Above] all the rest, the trophies gave most distaste to the Jews; for, as they imagined them to be images, included within the armour that hung round about them, they were sorely displeased at them, because it was not the custom of their country to pay honours to such images.¹⁰

Although Herod mollified some Jews by removing images, others remained unpacified. Anger over the games resulted in an attempt on Herod’s life. The would-be assassins were discovered, tortured, and executed. The spy who betrayed them was captured and killed by local

⁸ *trecwmen toh prokeimenon hnhh ajgwha*.

⁹ *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, s.v. “Games” (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1939).

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.8.1.

vigilantes, “pulled to pieces, limb from limb, and given to the dogs.”¹¹ Community solidarity made it impossible for Herod to discover the perpetrators of the lynching until he brutally tortured some of the female eyewitnesses into revealing what they had seen, with the result that the vigilantes’ entire families were destroyed.¹²

With such hatred toward the games on the part of pious Jews, it is unlikely that the author of such a Jewish book is suggesting that the revered saints of the Old Testament are spectators in an amphitheater. The mention of *race* or *course* [*ajghwa*] in 12:1 does not obligate the reader to visualize a *Greek* race and its trappings. Without clear mention of an amphitheater, it is assuming too much to conclude that the author was alluding to such a non-Jewish element of society.

Without the suggestions of an amphitheater and spectators, *cloud* is no longer suggestive of a crowd watching a race.¹³ Instead, it refers logically to the abundance of witnesses in Chapter 11, some mentioned by name but others not specified because their number is so vast (32-38). They *surround* [*perikeimenon*] us only in a figurative sense: they are so numerous that we cannot escape the reality of their testimonies.¹⁴

Other questionable assumptions concern the nature and activity of the believing dead. What are they doing now that they have left sin and the flesh behind? Only a few hints are given in Scripture. They are with Christ (2 Cor. 5:8) and are worshipping God together with angels and other saints (Heb. 12:24). Are they aware of events on earth? Possibly,¹⁵ but Scripture does not

¹¹ Ibid, 15.8.4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Undoubtedly *cloud* in the popular imagination also brings to mind heavenly beings (angels, the dead) who perch themselves on the clouds and play harps. That is nowhere suggested in the context of Heb. 12:1, however.

¹⁴ The same word is used in 5:4: the high priest could not escape the reality of his weakness [*perikeitai ajsqeneian*].

¹⁵ Several passages in Revelation are usually cited as evidence, e.g. 9:10.

tell us of how much they are aware or how they achieve this awareness. Personal observation is nowhere indicated.

In Catholic theology, Heb. 12:1 is used as a starting point for the doctrine of the invocation of saints. David Armstrong, Catholic apologist, not only appeals directly to Scripture but also to Protestant interpretations to defend the doctrine. Citing four well-known Protestant reference works,¹⁶ he points out that these all “confirm that the element of ‘spectatorship,’ which lends itself to the Catholic notion of communion of saints, where saints in heaven are aware of, and observe events on earth, is present in Hebrews 12:1, and cannot be ruled out by any means, on the basis of a doctrinal bias.”¹⁷

Protestants, for the most part, have agreed with the reality of a communion *of* the saints but have rejected any communication *with* the saints—either our communicating with them or their communicating with us. Calvin argues against the saints in heaven having any part in ministering to believers on earth, for Scripture says that this is the job of angels.¹⁸ The cloud metaphor, he says, refers to the sheer number of witnesses that can be mustered to give testimony

¹⁶ Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Vincent’s *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Robertson’s *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, and Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

¹⁷ David Armstrong, “Witnesses of Hebrews 12:1,” 1998, January 8, 2001, <<http://ic.net/~erasmus/raz283.htm>>.

¹⁸ “But if they [the Roman Church] would compare saints who have departed this life with angels, it will be necessary to prove that saints are ministering spirits, to whom has been delegated the office of superintending our salvation, to whom has been assigned the province of guiding us in all our ways, of encompassing, admonishing, and comforting us, of keeping watch over us. All these are assigned to angels, but none of them to saints. How preposterously they confound departed saints with angels is sufficiently apparent from the many different offices by which Scripture distinguishes the one from the other. No one unless admitted will presume to perform the office of pleader before an earthly judge; whence then have worms such license as to obtrude themselves on God as intercessors, while no such office has been assigned them? God has been pleased to give angels the charge of our safety. Hence they attend our sacred meetings, and the Church is to them a theatre in which they behold the manifold wisdom of God, (Ephesians 3:10.) Those who transfer to others this office which is peculiar to them, certainly pervert and confound the order which has been established by God and ought to be inviolable.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.22.

In the present era, confusing even the essence of saints and angels is common. Many persons, including believers, assume that angels are humans who have died and gone to heaven. A common tradition is that they enter an apprenticeship in which they must earn their wings. Such beliefs are reinforced by movie classics such as *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

to the life of faith. These saints have already run the race and are waiting at the finish line—not along the course—to “applaud and hail our victory.”¹⁹ Those who have “completed their course” do not assist those who are presently alive.²⁰ Calvin allows that the saints in heaven may pray for the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, but he does not understand them to be bothered with “earthly cares.” They cannot commune with us nor can we commune with them. Furthermore, it is not necessary for us to “pry into” what they do.²¹

Rather than observing us, the saints focus on God, even as we should be doing.

Attractiveness of a cheering section

Having one’s own cheering section is an attractive idea in a society that has indoctrinated us into thinking that we need constant affirmation in order to forestall anxiety attacks, a society in which physical and emotional pain have no right to intrude upon our lives. It is comforting to be assured that Grandpa, who was such an inspiration to one as a child, is now looking down “from the lofts of heaven,”²² or that Mother has joined Moses, Rahab, and David to cheer one on in life’s race.²³ The widow’s husband is not really absent on Sunday morning but has moved to an invisible balcony and is worshipping with her.²⁴ D. L. Moody, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the praying grandmother all end up in that great arena in the sky, yelling “Go! Go! Go!”²⁵

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 12:1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.20.23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.20.24.

²² Kinsey.

²³ Janet Noble Richardson, “Running the Race,” sermon, St. Timothy Presbyterian Church, Aug. 16, 1998, Nov. 10, 2000, <http://www.unidial.com/~sttimothy/sermon_8_16_98.html>.

²⁴ “Today’s Moment with God,” *Christ the King Online* (Vestal, NY: Christ the King Lutheran Church, Feb. 10, 1999). Nov. 10, 2000, <http://www.tier.net/ctkonline/moments/99-092-10.htm>

²⁵ Anthony, R. D. [Psalmsinger]. “The Faith Run.” Nov. 10, 2000. <<http://www.geocities.com:0080/Heartland/Fields/2767/faithrun.html>>. The author has a Baptist background.

How ironic that a passage emphasizing our need to focus on Jesus can be reinterpreted to make the witnesses focus on us!

Once with God, their attention turns back to us. And it turns back to us because they know *we* have a race to run! They know we need encouragement to finish the race before us. And what these witnesses from heaven are saying is this—“Keep your eyes on Jesus . . . If we did it, you can do it, too.” . . . In fact, if you are quiet, you will hear them . . . That’s why I would like for you and your family when you go outside today to look up in the sky and wave . . . to the persons who are looking down on us . . . Wave to them, and say, “Thank you! . . . Thanks for your support!”²⁶

Support and *encouragement* are widely thought to be any word or deed that causes someone to feel good about self. This popular view, however, lacks a significant element. Biblical encouragement has an end goal of righteousness. Reaching that goal calls for discipline and even rebuke, concepts not included in the popular perception of encouragement. Nor are they included in the saints-as-spectators view. Those saints only have positive things to say.

Encouragement is the theme that unifies Heb. 10:19-12:29. With Jesus Christ as our high priest (10:21) we are to draw near to God in faith (22), holding unswervingly to our hope (23). As part of a community of faith, we are to encourage one another “toward love and good deeds” (24), especially in light of the Lord’s soon return (25). The writer includes warnings about the consequences of not persevering (26-31). He also commends, applauding his readers for holding on during the “earlier days” when they suffered persecution (32-34). He encourages them to persevere because the Lord will soon return (35-39).

In Chapter 12 the writer continues with warnings and reminders of God’s discipline. God loves us enough to discipline us so that we will live holy lives (4-13). We are not to balk at such discipline but to submit to its pain, realizing that this too is part of running the race toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

²⁶ Kinsey.

Poor substitutes

Why would Christians think they need a cheering section of departed saints? Is it because they cannot hear God giving them encouragement? Is it perhaps because they associate discipline with God but encouragement with others that will only say “Rah! Rah!”? Has it become easier to conjure up mental pictures of dead biblical heroes or departed loved ones than to listen by faith to the voice of the indwelling Holy Spirit?

Paganism seduces us with spirit guides, sometimes garbed as guardian angels, that comfort and encourage.²⁷ Catholicism offers saints through whom God answers prayer and performs miracles. All of these become substitutes for God.²⁸ God, however, promises encouragement through the work of the Counselor (Jn. 14:17), through the promises of Holy Scripture (Rom. 15:4), and through the ministry of Christ’s body—those who comprise the living, visible, and accessible community of saints (Rom. 12:8, Heb. 10:25). If these do not function as intended, the discouraged runner can be tempted to take his eyes off of Christ and look for encouragement in places where he should not.

A second reason for the attraction lies in the loss brought by death. Imagining loved ones to be part of a cheering section leads us to believe they have not really gone away. They are in the cloud of witnesses that cheer us on, thereby breaking the barrier that God has established between life and death. They can become another substitute for God.

²⁷ Even ancestors can function as spirit guides. Many genealogists believe that their ancestors are guiding them in the search for family members of the past. (See the discussion that took place on the Oregon Trail e-mail list during December 2000 under “They want to be found”: <<http://archiver.rootsweb.com/th/index/OREGON-TRAIL/2000-12>>.) The western world is not as far removed from ancestor worship as it would like to think.

²⁸ Catholic theology does not see the saints as *substitutes* for God.

The risks

It might seem an innocent matter to have such a cheering section. After all, what harm could there be in picturing an encouraging crowd when depression looms? In fact, judging from current commentaries, to say that the witnesses of Heb. 12:1 are *not* watching and cheering is to hold a minority view.

However, it is innocent only if it is true. Imagining cheering saints in the grandstands has implications. Cheers are of no value unless they can be heard. If the saints are cheering but we are unable to hear them, they cannot encourage us.

On the other hand, if we insist that the cheers are real, then we must logically admit that the dead can communicate with the living. Cheers *are* a kind of communication. Once this is realized, only a fine line separates one-way from two-way contact. If the saints in heaven can communicate with us, what is to prevent us from communicating with them? In fact, the Catholic Church has argued for this for centuries. The biblical prohibition against consulting the dead,²⁹ they say, doesn't apply to the saints. The saints are not dead; they are alive. *Dead* only applies to those who are spiritually dead, not to those who are alive in heaven with God. Furthermore, it is claimed, the prohibition is not against contacting the dead but against conjuring them up, especially to get information out of them.³⁰ With such equivocation, communication with the dead is allowed and even encouraged on the condition that it be done through prayer and not through a séance. The dead respond by interceding for us. In fact, they *must* do so, for the saints are to pray for one another. Bodily death does not abrogate the command.

²⁹ Deut. 18:9-15, et. al.

³⁰ James Akin, "Praying to the Saints." Catholic Information Network. 16 January 2001. <<http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/praying.htm>>.

The writer of Hebrews, however, does not balk at the word *dead*. Abel is dead; Abraham is dead. His point is that they died while believing in the promises of God. They are very much contrasted with us who are still alive.

Walking the line

In Protestant theology, a strict barrier has traditionally separated the dead from the living. “Talking with the dead” is usually thought of as (1) a mental problem, in which someone cannot accept reality; (2) a deception, in which a person believes that the dead are actually available; or (3) a practice of the occult, in which case the involved persons are actually talking with demons.

The Protestant pastor and writer, Randy Alcorn, has incorporated some concepts normally associated with Catholicism into his novel, *Deadline*.³¹ In heaven, Finney, who has recently arrived, is being tutored by his guardian angel, Zyor. Zyor argues that since the saints in heaven pray for those still on earth, Finney needs to pray for his friend, Jake. Zyor explains:

“But if the prayers of righteous imperfect ones on earth are effective, how much more the prayers of righteous saints made perfect in the very presence of Elyon?³² Your prayers have no more ended that your life has. You have been praying ever since you arrived. With every thought and word of gratitude and wonder expressed to Elyon you have prayed. Now it is time to intercede for those below.”

Zyor paused, taking on the look of the tutor.

[Zyor:] “In the dark world there were theological discussions about whether or not to pray for the dead.”

[Finney:] “I remember.”

[Zyor:] “I often wanted to speak through the veil and say, ‘There’s a much more important subject you’ve never considered—whether or not the dead pray for you.’”³³

At this point Alcorn hastens to explain that this does not mean we are to invoke the saints. The angel Zyor continues:

³¹ Randy Alcorn, *Deadline* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1994). A sequel, *Dominion*, (1996) is built on the same themes.

³² *Elyon* is the author’s name for God whenever the scene is in heaven.

“It is not that men need ask those in heaven to pray for them. But they do pray, as Elyon allows them, the cloud of witnesses, to see the drama acted out on earth. Pray for your friend, Jake. . . . Your friend needs your prayers. Perhaps part of Elyon’s purpose in bringing you here now is that your prayers for him may accomplish even more.”³⁴

In a continuation of the celestial drama, Jake prays for his friend Finney.

But this is merely fiction, isn’t it? Of course! However, it is fiction meant to teach.

Alcorn promotes the same concepts in his sermons.³⁵ Although he admits using sanctified imagination in his novels, in his sermons he defends with Scripture the idea that the redeemed of heaven pray for their fellow saints below. He bases his conclusion on the assumption—and he admits it is an assumption—that the saints of heaven are aware of what is taking place on earth.³⁶

If we assume heaven is a place of ignorance of or disinterest in earth, then we will naturally assume those in heaven couldn’t or wouldn’t pray for people here. In contrast, if we believe it is a place of interest in and observation of God’s program and people on earth, and where the saints and angels talk to God, then we would naturally assume they *do* pray to God for those on earth. This is my assumption.³⁷

Alcorn carries his assumptions too far, however, when he argues that this awareness (1) is a result of personal observation, and (2) “naturally” results in intercessory prayer. Although a few biblical passages do seem to indicate cognizance of selected earthly events, especially in

³³ Alcorn, *Deadline*, 89.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Alcorn, Randy, “Rethinking our Beliefs about Heaven.” Eternal Perspective Ministries. 11 Jan 2001, <<http://www.epm.org/heavreth.html>>.

³⁶ Alcorn uses several passages in Revelation (e.g., 6:9-11, 18:20) to support this assumption. He also refers to Lk. 15:10: “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Interpreting this as meaning the angels rejoice (though, strictly speaking, the rejoicing is *in the presence of* angels), he concludes that the saints in heaven must also rejoice, for they would not be any less disinterested than the angels (Alcorn, “Future Home, Present Reference Point”). Even if the angels are rejoicing, however, the passage does not indicate how the angels became aware of the repentance. It may be through personal observation or it may not be. In the context of the three parables about lost things, only the owner is indicated as being the observer. The owner shares his or her good news with friends and neighbors, and *then* they rejoice in solidarity. The woman invites her neighbors to rejoice with her *after* she finds the coin. Likewise, the shepherd tells his friends *after* he has found the lost sheep and returned home. Finally, it is the *father* who invites his friends and neighbors to rejoice over the return of his prodigal son. If an analogy is to be drawn from these three parables, it is God who finds the lost, and it is God who shares the good news with his “friends and neighbors” so they can rejoice with him.

³⁷ Alcorn, “Rethinking our Beliefs.”

Revelation, Scripture does not indicate *how* this awareness comes about. Concluding that it comes through personal observation is only the imagination at work, filling in a void that curiosity is not satisfied to leave alone. Using symbols from apocalyptic literature to conclude that this observation “naturally” results in intercessory prayer goes beyond the boundaries of sound hermeneutics.

Furthermore, Alcorn is highly selective in the application of his assumptions. The saints observe and pray for the ones to whom they had close emotional (and familial) ties. Thus, he thinks that his mother watches him preach his sermons and that she watched his daughters being baptized.³⁸ His statements to his daughters are even more assertive.

I don't tell my daughters “Grandma would be proud of you,” I tell them “Grandma *is* proud of you.” How condescendingly we speak of those who have died as if they are now in the dark about what's happening in the universe. On the contrary, they are in the know, it is *we* who are in the dark.³⁹

Although he shies away from advocating the invocation of the saints, he has come so close to the dividing line that he is, in fact, stepping on it. If people on earth are *aware* that saints in heaven are watching and praying for them, what is to prevent their speaking to them? This is in fact what happens close to the end of *Deadline*. Jake, still alive and recently converted, is mulling over events brought about in part by Finney's demise. Jake addresses his dead friend: “Maybe you're able to see me, Finn. I hope so. I think you'd get a kick out of all this.”⁴⁰

In the next paragraph, Finn answers: “*I am getting a kick out of it, bro,*” thus confirming that Jake has connected with him.⁴¹ Jake doesn't know if Finn has heard him or not. The novel's message to the reader, however, is that Finn has heard clearly. Once the reader becomes

³⁸ Alcorn, “Heaven: Future Home, Present Reference Point” (Eternal Perspective Ministries), 11 Jan 2001, <<http://www.epm.org/heavserm.html>>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Alcorn, *Deadline*, 413.

convinced that the fantasy of *Deadline* represents reality, he does not have to be hindered by Jake's uncertainty. The reader can address the departed with assurance and expect the appropriate response in heaven. It is no harder to imagine that he has been heard than it is to imagine cheers in Heb. 12:1. The "cloud of witnesses" is now not only a community of observing, cheering fans but also an assembly of prayer warriors, interceding on behalf of the living and logically inviting their prayer requests.

Catholics would have no problem with this. In their theology, both saints and angels intercede for human beings. Alcorn has used the same scriptures as the Catholics to defend his views.⁴² However, it is highly questionable that this was a part of Church doctrine in the early centuries of Christianity. The Church Fathers mention praying *for* the dead, but they neither advocate nor refer to Christians praying *to* the dead.⁴³ This is a later doctrine that was reinforced by the 25th session of the Council of Trent in response to the Reformation's indictment against praying to the saints.

⁴¹ Ibid; italics in the original.

⁴² Catholics also appeal to a passage in 2 Maccabees that indicates the prophet Jeremiah, long since dead, is praying for the people and for Jerusalem. Judas Maccabeus is trying to encourage his soldiers by relating a vision in which Onias, the former high priest, appears with Jeremiah. "Onias then said of him, 'This is God's prophet Jeremiah, who loves his brethren and fervently prays for his people and their holy city'" (2 Macc. 15:14, NAB). Jeremiah then presents a gold sword to Judas, telling him that it will be the instrument by which he will crush his enemies.

Such visions are common in ancient lore. A royal personage or other figure of high rank appears in a vision to pass on a particular sword or other weapon that gives the recipient the right to rule and to conquer enemies. For more information on this topic, see Chapter 4 of *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* by Patrick Geary (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1994).

⁴³ e.g., St. Augustin, *Letters of St. Augustin* 22.6, trans. by J. G. Cunningham, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 1. vol. 1, *The Confessions and Letters of Augustin with a Sketch of his Life and Work*, ed. Philip Schaff, in *Master Christian Library* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1996); CD-ROM.

Nevertheless, by the eighth century invoking the saints was fully established. Even the iconoclasts, who opposed the use of images to represent Christ or the saints because of their connection with superstition and idolatry, declared in their Iconoclastic Conciliabulum in Constantinople in 754 A.D. (Sometimes called the Mock Synod of Constantinople) that anyone denying the invocation of saints is profitable should be anathema. ("Epitome of the Definition of the Iconoclastic Conciliabulum, Held in Constantinople, A.D. 754," *Medieval Sourcebook: Iconoclastic Council, 754*, edited by Paul Halsall. Feb. 11, 2001, <[http://arbor.ucdavis.edu/MST/20A/ Icons.html](http://arbor.ucdavis.edu/MST/20A/Icons.html)>.)

Given the long history of the practice in Catholicism and the increasing influences of the occult in our present age, a move to establish within Protestant doctrine the idea that the saints are watching and praying for us brings with it some dangers. Syncretism is always a peril for the Church. In this case, appealing concepts regarding the unseen world end up removing the boundaries that God has set up between the dead and the living. Instead of the dead being kept alive in memory for godly purposes, they can end up having personal influence over our lives, a concept not far removed from the veneration of ancestors practiced by some Asian and African religions.

However, the subtlest danger for most Christians lies in the matter of focus. Seeing the cloud of witnesses as cheering onlookers draws us away from the very emphasis of the passage—keeping our eyes on Jesus. The Old Testament saints of Chapter 11 kept their eyes on the goal, pressing onward even when they did not see the fulfillment of the promises. It is this centralized focus that the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to imitate, a focus that will allow them to endure without compromise hardships and persecutions. Even these saints paled by comparison to Jesus, who “for the joy set before him endured the cross.”⁴⁴ He not only reached the goal but also provided the means by which all others could at last obtain what had been promised. Jesus did not just keep the faith; he was the Author and Finisher of the faith.

Trying to hear cheers that are only in our imagination serves as a distraction. It is not necessary to call upon imagination for encouragement when the Word of God is visible to our eyes and audible to our ears. Nor is it prudent to stress a mystical connection with departed saints when Scripture’s emphasis is upon our being united to *Christ*. Our focus is to be on Jesus whom

⁴⁴ Heb. 12:2.

we *know* is aware of every thought and deed and who cares enough to give the encouragement we need—along with rebuke when necessary.

Some go beyond *imagining* the presence of the witnesses and begin to *feel* them. Instead of just cheering from the grandstands, departed loved ones are walking alongside us, sitting with us in church, praying for us, and guiding us.

I began to sense [my grandfather's] presence late at night . . . Very often during this writing time, this prayer time, I felt that my grandfather was back in my life

Looking back on this experience . . . I can now see that what I was going through was what we call in traditional Christian language the “great communion of saints.” . . . I have come to believe that the veil between this world and the next is very thin indeed. If we had but hearts attuned to such spiritual realities, we would know that we are never alone and that we are surrounded by those who have gone before.

It is this glimpse of the greater spiritual reality that the author [of] Hebrews wants his readers to see “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”⁴⁵

Do we have any connection with departed saints? Yes. The mystical communion of saints is a reality. We are all part of the one body of Christ. In Heb. 12:18-24, the author indicates that our worship on earth joins the worship of angels and saints that is already taking place in heaven. We can be aware of this connection as a fact, but we will not witness it until we have been glorified. The communion of saints that we are to experience now is our fellowship with other believers here on earth. It is among ourselves as fellow pilgrims that we are to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24-25).

Our encouragement should not come from an indistinct, nebulous crowd whose cheers we must imagine but from the pages of Scripture. It is here that the lives of the saints are written for our benefit, as Paul has affirmed in Rom. 15:4: “For everything that was written in the past

⁴⁵ James W. Nutter, “Grandfather’s Love,” sermon; Houston: Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church, Aug. 16, 1998; Nov. 10, 2000, <<http://www.palmertx.com/Sermons/Nutter/nutter8-16-98.htm>>.

was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Everett F. Harrison comments,

The use of the Scriptures promotes “endurance” and supplies “encouragement.” Both may be learned by precept and example from these records of the past. These two elements are intimately connected with hope, for the endurance is worthwhile if it takes place on a course that leads to a glorious future, and the encouragement provides exactly that assurance. . . . Endurance and encouragement are ultimately God’s gift, though they are mediated through the Scriptures.⁴⁶

It is significant that of all the names recorded in Hebrews 11, none are from the New Testament era. Hebrews is generally thought to have been written between 60 and 100 A.D.⁴⁷ By 60 A.D. several had already fallen as martyrs. Stephen was stoned around 36 or 37 A.D. James fell to Herod’s sword about 44 A.D. It is unknown how many others may have been martyred during the ensuing persecution. Yet all the examples in Hebrews 11 are from the Old Testament. Verses 39-40 would confirm that the author has in mind the heroes of the faith that lived prior to the establishment of Christianity, because “only together with us”—those under the New Covenant—“would they be made perfect.”

The saints are not witnesses *of* us but *to* us. They encourage by example, not by cheers and affirmation. When they were running the race, who comprised *their* cheering section? Who was *their* encouragement? It was God who was watching and God who cared enough about them to sustain them through life’s difficulties. Where was their focus? On God and on the heavenly prize (Heb. 11:10, 16, 35). When were they rewarded? They haven’t been yet—at least, not in full. The resurrection they were anticipating (Heb. 11:35) has not yet taken place. Their

⁴⁶ Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin,+ Zondervan NIV Bible Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989-1997). CD-ROM.

⁴⁷ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 9.

completion will come with ours, so that “together with us [will] they be made perfect” (Heb. 11:40). It is then that the communion of the saints will reach perfection.

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