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So Great A Cloud of Witnesses (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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...who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, 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 mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 11:33-12:2)

Among my most beloved chapters of Scripture is the “roll-call of faith” found in Hebrews 11. There, St. Paul recalls the bold acts of faith and martyrdom endured by the saints of God. Beginning with the account of Righteous Abel who was slain by his brother Cain, and continuing through the Patriarchs and Prophets, the Apostle describes these lives of faith “of whom the world was not worthy.” Its summary and conclusion are found in the passage quoted above.

There are at least three ways to read the passage: the first is to take it simply as a literary device in which we are being exhorted to remember these great historic figures of faith. Of course such a reading does not make sense of their “imperfection.” In what sense are literary examples imperfect or incomplete?

A second reading would be that of the typical “two-storey” universe. In this reading the saints have died and taken their place with Christ far away in heaven. From this place, far-removed, they watch us and cheer us on. This second reading reminds me of the popular 90’s song “From a Distance” (it won a Grammy for the best song of year in 1991). It’s pop theology told us:

...From a distance you look like my friend,
even though we are at war.
From a distance I just cannot comprehend

what all this fighting is for.

From a distance there is harmony,
and it echoes through the land.
And it's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves,
it's the heart of every man.

It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves.
This is the song of every man.
And God is watching us, God is watching us,
God is watching us from a distance.
Oh, God is watching us, God is watching.
God is watching us from a distance.

My first reaction to this song was to think: "from a distance Mars looks inhabited." Primarily it seemed clear to me that God does not see us "from a distance." God is "everywhere present and filling all things" as described in the hymnography of the Orthodox Church. We may have images of thrones and golden streets, but if such images mean that God dwells at a distance then they are deeply misleading.

This third interpretation not only understands that the great cloud of witnesses who surround us are not at all far away. The same point is emphasized with the assertion that "they shall not be made perfect apart from us." Their perfection or "completion" is intimately joined to our own perfection. This is the classic doctrine of the *communion of saints*. Their lives, even their perfection and completion in Christ, is not something that can be considered on an individual basis. Our completion in Christ is, finally, the completion of our life in the Church, His body.

There is a commonplace expression in Western theology of the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant – making a two-storey distinction between our lives here and the saints' lives elsewhere. However, the teaching of the Church as found in her Creeds, clearly states that the Church is "One." "Christ is not divided," St. Paul taught. Thus the "cloud of witnesses" that surround us, not only cheer for us, but participate in our struggle. They are not made perfect or complete apart from us, but we are not made perfect apart from them. The perfection we have in Christ is one perfection – Christ Himself, the "author and finisher" of our faith.

Death is generally received as a deep wound. The loss we encounter is not without its accompanying grief. But our death is also the death of Christ, because His life becomes our life. It is not the life or perfection of those we love that establishes the foundation of our faith.

For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's (Romans 14:7-8).

The foundation of our life – and the foundation of the lives of the one family of faith is the same foundation: the life and perfection of Christ – both author and finisher of our faith.

I rejoice that in Christ, nothing is lost. My grief itself, like death, will be trampled down by the death of Christ, and in Him I will share in the One life of His saints. Glory to God!

By Fr. Stephen Freeman

This article can be found at a August 31, 2011 post on Fr. Stephen Freeman's Blog: <http://fatherstephen.wordpress.com/>

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