



[TEACHER NOTE: If you choose to close with a candlelight memorial service as described on the final page, be sure to be prepared with candles.]

Movement One – The Cloud

SCREEN: Who is in your cloud of witnesses today?

[TEACHER NOTE: This message begins with a guided visualization experiment. You can complete this exercise in person or online, and you can add or subtract details to fit the maturity and attention span of your group. Take your time as you give instructions to allow your students the opportunity to think through each instruction.]

Look up right now. Envision being outside on a beautiful partly cloudy day. Feel the warmth of the sun and the breeze of the wind on your skin. Close your eyes and see clouds in the sky. Now, I want you to think about people in your life who have gone before you who have encouraged you and championed you. See their faces. Imagine family members whom you know and those whom you never met. Imagine teachers, pastors, friends, and neighbors who have helped you and been kind to you. Hear their words.

Now open your eyes. Who did you see? Who is in your cloud of witnesses today?

Today, we are going to talk about “The Cloud of Witnesses.”

SCREEN: Witnesses testify to the experience of what they have seen and heard in a given time.

Witnesses cannot testify to what they have not seen. They cannot talk about what they have not heard. They cannot share the details of something they have not experienced. In a courtroom, when witnesses share second-hand information or assumptions, it is called conjecture or hearsay. Second-hand information is not permissible in court. Witnesses can only report on their own, first-hand, personal experiences.

Let's read a couple of verses from Hebrews together.

Hebrews 11:32-40 ESV

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Hebrews 12:1-2 ESV

1 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, 2 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.

The writer of Hebrews in these verses recounts the testimonies of the faith of many who had died and provided them as historical examples for the reader. In fact, the whole of chapter 11 recounts in incredible detail a summary of much of the Old Testament heroes of the faith like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses.

There are so many testimonies of witnesses that the writer wanted to describe that there was this fast-paced listing of incomplete sentences and run-on fragments that listed people, situations, circumstances, events, moments, landmarks, and even more that you can imagine the writer

frantically writing all this out. It makes me lose my breath just thinking about all these people who exemplified to the incredible faith of God and Jesus Christ who were cited here. There are so many people here gathered who stand as a testament to the reality of God that they are envisioned as “a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1).

The image here is not unlike the picture that John paints for us in Revelation of the sea of people gathered before the throne of God in heaven. In fact, let’s read about that just a little.

Revelation 7:9-10 ESV

9 “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

This is the great cloud of those who have died and have kept the faith. These are those who continue to inspire and guide us today in an amazing and incredible way as well.

[TEACHER NOTE: If your church or group does not regularly recite The Apostle’s Creed, it may be helpful to read and/or provide the full text of this affirmation to your students.]

In one of the ancient creeds of the church called, “The Apostle’s Creed,” we affirm the belief in the “communion of the saints.” In one sense, the communion of the saints is way more than Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper itself. The Great Communion is a foreshadowing of this incredible family reunion in heaven when we will be in full communion with God in all of God’s glory, without our own sin, and united and reunited with all the saints who have gone before us.

We do not venerate, worship, or pray to these saints, but we can learn some incredibly powerful things from the lives of these saints. Those saints in our own lives can continue to inspire and motivate us towards a fuller relationship with God.

SCREEN: There is something special and something very ordinary about the designation of being a saint.

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