

Memorial Day of Faith
May 28, 2006
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Tomorrow is Memorial Day. So, as we begin, let's briefly look at some of the history of Memorial Day. Memorial Day dates back to the 1860 and was originally referred to as Decoration Day. It began as a day were people came together to honor the civil war dead. **(Slide of National Cemetery with flags on graves?)** It was not an official governmentally recognized holiday until the 1960's. Today, Memorial Day is used as a time to remember all of our dead. Many of us take this day or weekend and remember those who have meant something to us. We sometimes visit grave sites to put flowers and ribbons on them. However, to many, this weekend is just a chance to get away and relax and maybe go to the lake as an unofficial beginning to summer. So what does Memorial Day mean to you?

Sadly, for me, Memorial Day has historically been a day that means the beginning of summer. As I prepared for today I researched some facts about Memorial Day and Read the book of Hebrews, and it is in the scripture that I began to find that Memorial Day can have more of a meaning to me.

In Hebrews 11 we see a family of faith from scripture. From Abel, Jacob, Moses etc. the scripture shows us examples of this family of faith dating back to Genesis. As I read Hebrews it reminded me of a genealogy that I have of my family. I have an Aunt Karen in Idaho that enjoys researching and compiling family history. She sifts through old records, letters, photos and documents, and has been able to trace the Bainbridge family all the way back to the 1600's and beyond. The genealogy that I have is not as detailed, as the one she owns. It is mainly a list of names, dates, and places. But it is more than a list to me. I don't know what it is, but as I read those names, dates and places, I have a sense of belonging to a family that is much larger and more significant than the one I think of on a daily basis. I felt the same way when I read Hebrews this past week. When I read Hebrews 11 I began to understand that I am part of a family of faith that is much larger than I could imagine.

What I began to realize is that I am part of a family with the disciples, apostles, judges, prophets, all the way back to Genesis. Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever considered that you may be part of a family that includes such people as Moses, Noah, Abraham, Peter, Paul, James, and John? If you are a Christian you are part of a family that is far greater than any family on earth can be. You are not just in a family of people who have gone on before us, but you are also in a family of believers who are still here today. When you accept Jesus Christ as savior, you, whether you like it or not, become apart of the family of God through him. Jesus is the cornerstone, or perfecter, of our family.

Lets read *(Slide) Hebrews 12:(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."* – ESV

I'd like to take some time and break down this passage a bit. Why? Because I know that if you are anything like me, we tend to lose some of the details of scripture as we read them for the first, second, or third time. I know that I am not the only one in this room who does this. I begin to read scripture with the greatest intentions, and before you know it, my mind is elsewhere. I begin to read something like this *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, blah, blah blah..."*

So here we go. *(Slide with whole verse, but this section bolded)"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."* What cloud of witnesses is the author talking about? He is referring to the faithful that had come before us. He is talking about the examples in chapter eleven. This section of the scripture brings up an image of a stadium or arena that is filled with people. *(Slide of a stadium or arena filled with people)* You know, one of those places where if you were to go sit in the middle of it, you would be literally surrounded by people. I can remember what it was like to play high school basketball and being surrounded by a crowd of fans during a pep rally. To see many people that you know, and many that you don't cheering you on as a team.

Hebrews brings up these images in me. We all have a cloud of witnesses. To me, some of those witnesses I imagine are John and Marilyn Brahnham, and Howard Lowe. These are some people who have meant something to me in this life of faith. John and Marilyn were friends to me when I was a teenager. They were an older couple who befriended me as a friend to their niece. They treated me as though I was a family member of theirs even when I barely knew them. They encouraged me and loved me in a church that I saw little love in. They were truly a genuine, real Christian example to me. When I went to their funerals four years ago, I saw that I was not the only one who would say that they are in their cloud of witnesses.

Howard Lowe is another one of my witnesses. I just know he is. Howard is my wife's, Deb, great uncle. For as long I as knew him I called him Uncle Howard. In fact most of the younger members of our family called him that. Uncle Howard came to live in Joplin a couple of years ago. He wasn't here too long before he passed away. The last memory I have of him took place in this church. One Sunday morning we sat out in the lobby shooting the breeze, when he looked me straight in the face and told me he was proud of me for what I was doing with the Salvage Yard. At this time, he trying to buy his house, and wanted me to know that when he completed that, he wanted to help the new ministry out. He

believed in The Salvage Yard, and in me. That was the last words he told me. So, I know that when we opened last January, he was there, laughing and smiling down on me. I know that John and Marilyn were there smiling down on me.

I also believe that there are many others in this cloud of witnesses that I don't know personally. One member that I believe is in my cloud of witnesses in Jonah, yes the big fish guy. You see, Jonah heard a call from God to go and share his word with others, and what did he do? He ran away. Now he did come back to fulfill his call, but he ran at first, just as I did. When I first heard my call to ministry I was excited and scared. Unfortunately, my fear won out at first and I ran from my calling. I was not eaten by a large fish, but I was unhappy, and lost. Obviously I am now following my calling, but I can imagine that in my cloud of witnesses are also those men and women who ran from their callings at first also. Just as I believe that there are people in my cloud of witnesses that shared some of the same addictions that I held onto. There are people who have overcome more than I have, and they are there cheering me on.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine a crowd of witnesses cheering you on in this life? Can you see a section of people cheering every time you choose to not indulge in an addiction? People who cheer when you have the courage to share your faith with someone. Do you know that there are some who smile and applaud when you get down on your knees and pray after a long day, and you choose to give your cares to Jesus?

Can you imagine a crowd of witnesses that applaud when you choose to give everything you have in you to perform a musical piece to your best ability? Or a cloud that cries out in joy when you choose to make ethical business decisions. How about a crowd that looks proud of you every time you choose to not cheat on an exam, or take a shortcut in life. Can you imagine?

Now, let's look at another section of this verse. **(Slide) Hebrews 12:(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.**"*
– ESV

What does this mean, Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith? I see it this way. Every family has a leader. To some it is a father, mother, grandparent. To the family of Christians, the leader is Jesus. He is the shining example and leader of this family. He is who we turn to for an example or guidance. In my family growing up, our leader was my father. He was the one who we all depended on to provide what was needed to feed, clothe, and house us.

Now, as I grew up I played many sports. I was a pretty decent soccer player into my early twenties. I played yearly, and it was one sport that I can remember my father supporting me from the crowd. You know, the stands could be filled with people screaming and yelling, and yet I could always hear him clearer than anyone else. Sometimes this was embarrassing to me, but as I look back on it now, I am glad that he was there. He was part of the crowd of witnesses during those games, and he would cheer every time I gave 100% to the game. He applauded every time I would pick myself back up, and dust myself off after falling. He was in the crowd of witnesses, but he was more than just in the crowd. He was who I longed to hear approval from more than any other. He was the one whose opinion mattered most. Likewise, Jesus should be that person in our cloud of witnesses in heaven.

You see, Jesus is the one we depend on for our salvation. He is responsible for making it possible for us to have eternal life and become a family member with God himself. Jesus is the perfecter of our faith. He is what holds us all together and I imagine his voice is the one we will be able to hear above all others in our cloud of witnesses. You know, people wear bracelets and shirts that say "WWJD?". This is similar to the question we ask ourselves when we are faced with a challenge. Usually though, we ask WW"Dad"D, or WW"Mom"D.

You see, Jesus is our leader, because he earned it. That goes to the ending of the scripture for today. **(Slide) Hebrews 12:(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.**" – ESV** Jesus is the rightful leader of this family of faith. He paid the ultimate price so that we may have a future and live. So live a life that has made his sacrifice worth it.

There is a great movie out that many think of on Memorial Day. It is the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. In this movie a mother has lost all of her sons but one in war, and there is a small group of soldiers who have the task of retrieving for last son, and getting him home safely. Not all of the soldiers on this mission live and there is a scene that takes place near the end of the movie that reminds me of sacrifice and a price that is paid so that someone can live.

Saving Private Ryan video clip

Now, on this Memorial Day, take some time to think about those who have come before us. Think about family and friends. Remember to think of the family of faith that supports us. Think about Jesus, whose sacrifice made our lives possible. Live a life that makes his sacrifice worth it.

If you are here today and you feel as though you may not have this cloud of witnesses we are talking about because you have never accepted Jesus as your savior and leader, please do so. Let him be the one you turn to when life is hard. Let him be the one you rejoice with when life is great. Listen for his voice above all others in that cloud of witnesses. If you say yes to him today, he will be hard to hear over the shouts and cheers of your cloud of witnesses, but he will be there. Leading them on as they welcome you to this family of faith that is much larger than any one of us imagine.