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Sermon Notes

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## **The Cloud of Witnesses: Waiting for Us to Finish**

### **Hebrews 11:39-40**

Much of the unfolding of Redemptive History involves WAITING!!!

Saints in heaven are perfectly conformed to Christ... yet they are still WAITING... some have been waiting for thousands of years!! Our text this morning tells us that they cannot be made perfect without us:

***Hebrews 11:40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.***

Revelation also depicts the saints in heaven WAITING for others to finish on earth

***Revelation 6:9-11 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. <sup>10</sup> They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" <sup>11</sup> Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.***

In the very next passage in Hebrews, we're told of a great cloud of witnesses... they are the departed saints in heaven, watching us as we run our race

***Hebrews 12:1 ¶ 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.***

So also creation is WAITING for us to finish our race:

***Romans 8:19-21 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the sons of God***

We are the CENTER OF ATTENTION as we run our race of salvation... and only when the last elect person has been converted will the perfection come

## I. Heroes' Faith Commended, not Consummated

### A. Commendation Brackets the Greatness of Hebrews 11

***Hebrews 11:39 These were all commended for their faith***

***Hebrews 11:1-2 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup> This is what the ancients were commended for.***

1. To be "commended" = to be praised
2. This is an incredible concept... that God Almighty would PRAISE a mere creature... and a sinful creature at that!

### B. Heroes of the Faith Listed and Celebrated

1. Act I: Before the Flood... Abel, Enoch, and Noah... commended for their faith
2. Act II: Patriarchs... Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph... commended for their faith
3. Act III: Exodus and beyond... Moses and Rahab, the Judges listed... King David... the prophets... all of them commended for their faith

### C. True Commendation Came from God Himself

1. Not just the commendation of a good conscience... but actual PRAISE FROM GOD

***1 Corinthians 4:5 At that time each will receive his praise from God.***

***John 5:44 How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?***

***John 12:43 they loved praise from men more than praise from God.***

2. The infinitely greater commendation of a warm welcome to heaven at death

***2 Peter 1:11 you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.***

3. Sinners saved by grace through faith, every one of them
4. Absent from the body... BUT PRESENT WITH THE LORD
5. What greater commendation than this? To be welcomed into an eternally beautiful home

### D. BUT... None Received What Was Promised

***Hebrews 11:39 ¶ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised***

1. Some lesser promises HAD been fulfilled... Abraham was promised a son by his own body and by the body of Sarah... after waiting patiently, he received THAT promise

***Hebrews 6:15 And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.***

2. BUT when Abraham died, he died looking ahead to an unfulfilled promise... his soul left his body and went into the heavenly realms... he was absent from the body but present with the Lord... his soul was made perfect, but he was still not complete, because he had no resurrection body
  - a. What was he waiting for? A CITY and a COUNTRY

***Hebrews 11:10 he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.***

***Hebrews 11:16 they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one.***

3. When Moses died, he died looking ahead to the same unfulfilled promise... waiting for the perfection that has yet to come... an eternal city and eternal country
4. David died also not having received what was promised... David's soul separated from his body and he went to the Heavenly Zion... but he has no resurrection body still

E. So... OT Faith Sufficient, But Still They Wait

1. They waited for Christ in their day
2. They wait NOW for full salvation... full consummation

II. God's Eternal Plan: Something Better for Us

***Hebrews 11:40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.***

A. God's Eternal Plan

1. The Greek word = "to see ahead of time"... PRO-VISION
2. God "looked after" us ahead of time
3. Scripture teaches us of an ETERNAL PLAN made before the foundation of the world

***Isaiah 14:26-27 This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. <sup>27</sup> For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?***

***Ephesians 1:4-5 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ***

***2 Timothy 1:9 This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time***

B. “Something Better”... mentioned again and again in Hebrews

1. Simply put, God knows what’s good, what’s better, and what’s best
  - a. If you are elect, you may have plans for your life and your future, but God’s plans are invariably BETTER
  - b. God has thought of US... the elect... and has crafted a plan that is infinitely BETTER than anything we could have thought of
2. Comparative... this is better than that
3. Author has again and again used this kind of language
  - a. Christ is superior to angels, to the OT prophets, to Moses and to Joshua
  - b. So also the salvation Christ came to give is BETTER

We have a better hope (Hebrews 7:19), a better covenant (Hebrews 7:22), founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6), and Christ Himself is a better sacrifice than those of the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:23)

4. So... God had planned SOMETHING BETTER for US... if US = New Covenant believers... our covenant is better than theirs, etc.
  - a. God had planned this BETTER covenant from the foundation of the earth
  - b. God had planned to give it to us in the fullness of time
  - c. The OT heroes of the faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 led amazing lives and did amazing things for God by faith... but they all died without receiving the promised Christ, the promised New Covenant
  - d. God planned to give US the superior covenant
5. OT Experience of Christ vs. Our Experience of Christ
  - a. Because the OT saints only saw Christ and welcomed him from a distance, they could not experience Christ as powerfully as we can

- b. In their day, they tried to understand the prophecies and tried to probe their mysteries, and this was the best they could do in experiencing Christ
- c. But in the four Gospels, we have the full record of Christ's birth, life, miracles, teachings, persecutions, suffering, death and resurrection
- d. Furthermore, we have the NT epistles which tell us plainly the theology of the cross and of the gospel of Jesus Christ
- e. AND we have after the day of Pentecost the gift of the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us... by the Spirit of Christ we can have consistent and magnificent fellowship with Christ moment by moment
- f. SO... God had planned SOMETHING BETTER for us now in Redemptive History... these OT heroes could not fully experience Christ as well as we can now

6. Well... that all sounds plausible, especially since the theme of Hebrews is the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old

7. BUT that is NOT what the author is talking about in Hebrews 11:39-40

C. The "Something Better" is Related to Promises they Hadn't Received AND their being "made perfect"

***Hebrews 11:40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect***

The "something better" that God has planned would result in BOTH us and them being "made perfect"

What the Old Testament saints DIDN'T RECEIVE yet has to do with their own PERFECTION...

### III. The Perfection That We All Wait For

***Hebrews 11:40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect***

A. "Perfect": What This Word Means

- 1. Greek word means to complete or finish; so the basic sense of the word is when a task is set out and is then accomplished, it is said to be complete... that is the basic sense
- 2. BUT also a sense of perfection in that in NO WAY could it be improved
- 3. Our perfection is God's purpose in our salvation

4. God intends us to be conformed to Christ in every way... He is the measure of our perfection
  5. This includes our internal part—our souls or spirits—AND our bodies
- B. Our Own Perfection Still Awaits

1. We are perfectly righteous in God's sight by faith in Christ
2. BUT we wrestle every day with indwelling sin

***Romans 7:18-21 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. <sup>21</sup> ¶ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.***

***Romans 7:24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?***

C. So Also the Perfection of the OT Saints Waits As Well

1. The OT saints are free from their wretched bodies of sin forever!!
2. When they died, their warfare ceased forever!

***Romans 6:7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.***

3. But God intended that we have a physical body... His plan includes the redemption of the body
4. So, the OT saints DO NOT HAVE EVERYTHING THAT WAS PROMISED... they were promised a resurrection body and that is the perfection they are waiting for

D. What is the Perfection? The Resurrection Body!!

1. OT Saints were perfectly justified by faith in Christ
2. OT Saints were separated from their mortal bodies by death and immediately made perfect in their souls

***Hebrews 12:22-23 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect***

3. The “spirits” of “righteous” people

- a. Justification: They were made **RIGHTEOUS** by faith in Christ

***Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.***

So... from the moment of faith in the Christ who would come later, these OT saints were **POSITIONALLY** righteous, forgiven of all their sins... in that way they were **PERFECT**

- b. But, like us, their spirits were not perfect in this life... while they lived, they still sinned... they still lusted and were angry and prideful and selfish and disobedient to God... David committed his sin with Bathsheba as a justified man

4. **AT DEATH**, the spirits of these OT saints were separated from their bodies and immediately went into the presence of God

They were

***2 Corinthians 5:7 absent from the body, present with the Lord***

5. In order to be in the presence of God, their spirit had to be “**MADE PERFECT**”... and that is exactly what Hebrews 12:23 says happened to these **SPIRITS**... they were **MADE PERFECT** by the power of God
- a. They perfectly love God
  - b. They perfectly desire His glory
  - c. They perfectly worship Him
  - d. They perfectly hate sin and all evil
  - e. They are perfectly obedient
  - f. They perfectly love each other and have no jealousy or pride toward each other
  - g. They could not be more zealous for the glory of God or eager to do His will or humble about themselves... they are **SPIRITUALLY PERFECT**
  - h. **AND YET**... they are not yet complete
  - i. In one sense, because they are absent from the body, they are not yet perfect
6. To prove the resurrection from the dead, Jesus spoke of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as all in this position

7. Until they receive the resurrection body, they will not be complete, and will not have received the things promised

8. When did God promise His people a resurrection body??

***Isaiah 26:19 But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.***

***Job 19:26 And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God***

***Ezekiel 37:1-3 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."***

***Ezekiel 37:5-6 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup> I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD."***

9. God intended the OT saints to live in the body forever... not one of them received what was promised

10. The body is an astonishing gift of God and God does not want to lay it aside lightly

***Psalm 139:14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.***

Chemically, the body is unequalled for complexity. Each one of its 30 trillion cells is a mini-chemical factory which performs about 10,000 chemical functions. And every cell has 10<sup>12</sup> (one trillion) bits of data —equal to every letter in ten million books! Each one also replaces itself every seven years. Each one is independent, yet cooperates with many millions of other cells.

The body's billions of parts all work together as a team—its 206 bones provide the framework and its 639 muscles enable it to move with incredible split-second timing. Its skill to balance is such that we can perform feats of acrobatics and yet have such strength that official human weight-lifting feats abound.

Our body is controlled and coordinated by over 16 billion neurons and 120 trillion "connection boxes" packed together into an unfathomably complex set of neuro-passways. The system is much like a modern nation, inter-connected by billions of telephone wires. All of this in a brain and spinal column that weighs slightly over three pounds! In comparison, a bee has only about 900 nerve cells, an ant only 250. In the large gauge fibers, nerve impulses

flash along at 300 miles per hour. All told, the human brain and nervous system is the most complex arrangement of matter anywhere in the universe.

The whole body system functions as a unified whole to enable a human to run, sing, remember, create and achieve the myriads of other phenomenal tasks we usually take for granted.

We are *incredibly complicated* in other ways as well. The adjectives in an unabridged dictionary which refer to human dispositions number a staggering 17,958. All of these words describe ways in which individuals can potentially categorize themselves—brave, kindly, liberal, powerful, *ad infinitum*. When the possible behavioral tendencies, talents, abilities, tastes, interests, attitudes and values—such as enjoying stamp collecting, travel, music or even one's inner thoughts and feelings—are added to the list, an almost infinite number is produced. One scientist estimated that our brain, on the average, processes over 10,000 thoughts and concepts each day—and some people process a much greater number.

The normal human voice can be heard from as far away as 200 yards although with practice, power, quality and volume have enabled it to be carried for as far as six miles. Words are formed by the vocal cords producing a wide range of sounds which, in turn, are modified by the tongue, teeth, lips and movement of the cheeks. The English language contains well over a million words, although the average person knows only about 50,000. The voice system, although able to produce hundreds of billions of unique and different words, speaks a total of only 4,800 daily. The body too, conveys information much as words do. With the eyes, lips, and movements of the face muscles, over 4,000 different messages, all which can be silently communicated by our face, have been catalogued. Fear, anger, happiness, and concern are just a few of these messages that we convey to each other many times every day.

The human ear with its 24,000 "hair cells" which convert vibrations to electrical impulses, is capable of hearing sounds of astonishing low level acoustic energy. Under favorable conditions a normal person may actually perceive sound waves with the power of only  $10^{-16}$  (1/10,000,000, 000,000,000) of a watt. This is so little energy that, if our ears were slightly more sensitive, we could actually hear the noise of the collision of molecules in the air.

Looking at the eye, we find that the amount of radiation (light energy) necessary to stimulate the human optic nerve is so small that if the mechanical energy required to lift a single pea one inch up in air was converted into light energy, it would provide enough stimulus to activate the optic nerve!

THIS IS THE HUMAN BODY... and GOD INTENDED THAT WE LIVE IN ONE FOR ALL ETERNITY

#### E. The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body

1. Christ is the firstfruits of a vast harvest

***1 Corinthians 15:20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.***

2. Conformed to His glorious body

***Philippians 3:21 by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.***

3. Described in 1 Corinthians 15

***1 Corinthians 15:42-44 The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; <sup>43</sup> it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; <sup>44</sup> it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.***

F. God's Plan for Perfect Unity

***Hebrews 11:40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect***

1. Why "only together with us...?"
  - a. God wanted all of His elect to receive their resurrection bodies at the same time!!
  - b. He didn't want the living to precede the dead, nor the dead to precede the living
  - c. ALL OF US RECEIVE OUR RESURRECTION BODIES TOGETHER... like Ezekiel's vision, the valley of dry bones... all the bones are raised at the same time
2. The perfect unity of the Godhead
  - a. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... Three Persons, One God
  - b. Perfectly one in intention, emotion, plan, purpose... never a shade of disagreement or disharmony
  - c. From eternity past, in perfect UNITY
3. The perfect harmony of the universe before sin
  - a. God created the universe totally dependent on Him, totally focused on Him
  - b. Everything revolved around Him... everything brought Him glory and was perfectly one with Him in every respect
4. Sin's explosive effect
  - a. Sin entered the world and destroyed that harmony, that unity
  - b. Sin had the effect of a fragmentation grenade... everything plying apart, divided, at odds with each other

- c. Man broken from God... man broken from one another... man broken from within himself...
- d. Creation groaning under the weight of this explosion of evil
- 5. God's plan for redemption: perfect unity w/o forsaking identity
- 6. Key scriptures
  - a. Ephesians 1

***Ephesians 1:9-10 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, <sup>10</sup> to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.***

- b. 1 Corinthians 15

***1 Corinthians 15:24-28 Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death. <sup>27</sup> For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. <sup>28</sup> When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.***

- c. John 17

***John 17:22-23 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me. May they be brought to perfect unity***

#### G. Final Perfection

- 1. All the elect together... not one missing

***John 6:39-40 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. <sup>40</sup> For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.***

- 2. All the elect glorified in soul and body: completely conformed to Christ
- 3. All the universe perfected in glory: New Heaven and New Earth

***2 Peter 3:13 But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness***

***Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.***

#### IV. Application

- A. Come to Christ
- B. Praise God for Your Superior Advantages in the New Covenant
- C. Live Accordingly!! [If OT Heroes did all these great things with inferior promises and inferior experience of Christ, HOW MUCH MORE should we be doing for God's glory]
  - 1. We have better promises
  - 2. We have a better history:
    - a. Christ has already come and died and risen!!
    - b. AND all these heroes of the Bible and church history have given us great role models
  - 3. We have better power: the indwelling Holy Spirit
  - 4. We should have better achievements of faith!!
- D. Embrace and Celebrate Unity

WAIT FOR EACH OTHER!!

***1 Corinthians 11:33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other.***

- 1. God is passionate for the unity of the elect as a reflection of His unity in the Trinity
- 2. Cherish that unity now... yearn for it... celebrate it
- 3. Strive for perfect unity here on earth

***Ephesians 4:3-6 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***

- 4. Forgive readily

***Colossians 3:13-14 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.***

5. Celebrate the amazing diversity of the Body of Christ IN THE MIDST of perfect unity

***Colossians 3:11 Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.***