

Ordinary Time, Proper 15

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.—Hebrews 12:1 NRSV

Explore

Look Up!

If this is a day with clouds, take the class outside and spend a few minutes watching them. Have students use the paper provided and record what they observe about the clouds. Ask for a scientific explanation. (Clouds are a mass of condensed water vapor in the form of tiny drops of water or ice crystals. They reflect all the visible colors of light that strike the particles. The clouds form when the sun's rays warm the water surfaces on the earth causing it to evaporate into the air. Then as the water vapor cools, it collects around microscopic dust particles in the air forming tiny cloud droplets. These come together to form clouds.) If the weather isn't cooperating, use magazine pictures or photographs of clouds. Ask: "Why would the author of the book of Hebrews use the term 'cloud' to describe witnesses?"

pens, paper

Extract

The Mysterious Book

The book of Hebrews is a mystery. Theologians don't agree on who wrote it, the time frame when it was written, to whom it was written, or its place of origin. The book begins as an essay, goes into a sermon, and ends like a letter. Its theology interprets the ministry of Jesus Christ but also explains practical things. Scholars describe Hebrews as a literary gem: well constructed and logical with a strong, rich language. Even though the time and place where Hebrews was written is disputed, estimates usually date it between 66 and 90 CE.

The author left no clue to his identity. Some scholars think Paul wrote the book, but Paul always put his name in the opening of the letters he wrote. The name is missing, and the language style and literary content is not consistent with Paul. Other scholars think a group of people wrote the material. The mystery remains unsolved.

To whom was the book written? Some say it was written to Jerusalem and the neighborhood surrounding it. Others think it was written only to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, while others think it was written to all Christians of that time. Another school of thought is that the book of Hebrews was written at a later time to a new generation who had not experienced the "glory" of the beginning of the new Christian church and had now become indifferent in their religion. Whoever it was, they were being persecuted and lived under pressure because of their beliefs. Their faith was weakened, and they were returning to their old ritualistic ways.

Live your life
as
a witness.

Why Was It Written?

Hebrews shows the new changes that had come about in religion since Jesus began teaching. There were changes from the old Jewish system to the new Christian way: changes to a new priesthood, a new covenant, new sacrifices, and a new church. It had been a long time since Jesus left earth. His return as promised to the disciples had not yet happened. The people's zeal for the new church had dwindled, and the switch from Judaism to the new religion left the people thinking that Jesus and his teachings were a "fly-by-night" experience. They didn't care to support their churches anymore. This letter was a renewed effort or pep talk to

strengthen the church in that day, a plea to remain faithful and not return to the old ways because of the trials and tribulations they were experiencing. One author describing the purpose of Hebrews suggests it was to “recapture the glow” or the energy of the early Christian church through the testimonies of the original generation. It was also a reminder that Jesus Christ’s message and life replaced the rituals of the past.

Cloud of Witnesses

Have the class read the scripture lesson for today, Hebrews 11:29—12:2. Then answer the following questions.

- Who were some of the Hebrews of the past who were witnesses?
- Can you name other people of the Bible not listed here who were witnesses?
- How were they able to be witnesses?
- What were some of the things that happened to these people?
- Why did these witnesses suffer? (verse 40)
- Can you name any people of the Book of Mormon, the early Community of Christ church, or people today who have witnessed for Jesus Christ?
- What part of this scripture applies to you today? (verse 12:1)

Bible

Hebrews 11:29—12:2

flip chart, markers

Put the information gathered from the previous questions into a chart.

Names of People of Faith	What They Did through Faith	What They Gave to Reach Their Goal

Experience

What’s Your Story?

All the biographies discussed above happened years ago. What experiences in your own faith history stand out to you? Divide the paper provided into three columns. On the left side list your historical facts and important faith memories. In the middle record your hurts and broken memories and on the right side note times when you experienced God’s love and comfort either directly or through one of God’s witnesses.

pens, paper

Expand

Become a Member of the Cloud of Witnesses

“Be courageous and visionary, believing in the power of just a few vibrant witnesses to transform the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 161:3c). Witnessing comes about because of your faith in God. Faith can be absorbed like a sponge from other people, books, media, and the environment around you. (Demonstrate with a dirty sponge and a bowl of water.) However, we need to be selective in what we absorb. (Demonstrate with another dry sponge and a bowl of dirty water.) We grow and learn about faith when surrounded by other faithful witnesses. If the author of the book of Hebrews spoke to you today, what would he say to you? Are you under pressure with your peer group and giving up on God’s things? Even today, witnesses can have much influence. Discuss how we can be selective in what we absorb in order to be the best living witnesses for Christ. As a class, create a checklist to help guide daily choices and to help fulfill Paul’s statement, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

flip chart, markers

Lectionary scriptures—Isaiah 5:1–7; Psalm 80:1–2, 8–19; Hebrews 11:29—12:2; Luke 12:49–56/12:58–65 IV