



“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2

Recently, a friend nominated me to do one of those Facebook survey type things where for ten days I had to post an album cover that illustrated my musical influences. No explanations or commentary. Just the picture of the album cover. You can probably guess at least a few of the ones I chose to post, and it won't surprise you that no country album made the list.

It was a fun exercise that also got me thinking about other influences in my life. I thought of the children's librarian at the local branch around the corner from my childhood home who cultivated my love of books and reading. A teacher showed me the value of discipline and hard work. An Old Testament professor at the seminary became a mentor, and taught me the value and necessity of contextual scripture study. I could go on (and I will a bit later in this devotion).

But for now let's observe that the examples I just cited all reside on the positive side of the ledger. The unfortunate fact, however, is that we can also allow our lives to be influenced by negative forces. I think that's one of the reasons Jesus taught us to pray *“lead us not into temptation.”*

On my bookshelf is a short treatise on the Lord's Prayer written by Pope Francis. In it he writes, *“This, ‘lead us not into temptation,’ is not a good translation. The French have changed the text, with a translation that means ‘Do not let me fall into temptation.’ I am the one who falls. It is not God who tosses me into temptation in order to see how I fall. A father does not do this. A father helps his child get up right away.”*

We might be reminded that it's important to discern who and what we allow into our lives, who or what will influence our thinking and our behavior. Who or what will drive our decision making, determine our pathways, shape our perspectives, and mold our character? We must not allow ourselves to fall into temptation.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, spiritual influences who are able to help us deepen our Christian faith and maintain a strong connection to our God. In the previous chapter the author carefully outlines the faith of our ancestors, from Abel to Abraham to Moses, and on through the judges, kings, and prophets. Certainly not without sin or serious character flaws (God never calls perfect people into service), these are giants of the faith nonetheless, positive influences on the people of God.

My mother would read Bible stories to me every night when I was a child. The pastors at my home church embraced my curiosity about Jesus. Jesuit writer and priest Henri Nouwen opened my heart to a fresh kind of spirituality. Who are the important, positive influences in your life? Who are the people guiding your faith development and helping you construct a spiritual framework that you can use to make some sense of this world?

Whoever they are, they, too, are counted among that great cloud of witnesses referred to by the author of Hebrews. Pray for them, thank them, do not let their work go unnoticed.

In Christ,
Pastor Chuck

P.S. The pastors have been writing weekly devotionals since the middle of March. We hope they are still meaningful and providing nourishment for your spiritual journeys. If you read today's devotional, would you be kind enough to send me an email or text? It would be good to know if this part of our ministry is helpful to you, or if there is something we could do differently. Thanks!

Let us pray. Good and gracious God, you surround us with a great cloud of witnesses. We give you thanks for each person who has influenced our faith lives and has kept us grounded in our relationship with you. We ask your blessing upon each one, that the seeds they have sown will blossom into faithful service for the sake of the gospel. Amen.