

Jesus and the Christian Walk



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Heb. 12:1–13:19.

MEMORY TEXT: “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” (Hebrews 12:1, NRSV).

KEY THOUGHT: While the book of Hebrews deals with heavenly issues, it touches on some very earthly matters, as well.

WHEN QUEEN VICTORIA WAS A CHILD, she didn't know that she was in line for England's throne. Her teachers tried to prepare her for that role but failed to inspire her to take her studies seriously. Finally, they told her that one day she would become queen. Victoria quietly said, “Then I will be good.” The realization that she had inherited this high calling gave her a sense of responsibility that profoundly affected her conduct.

Jesus has paid the supreme sacrifice for us; He serves as our High Priest of the heavenly sanctuary; and the promise of heaven is ours. If this fails to motivate us to live worthy of our high calling, what will?

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: In what ways are we “strangers and pilgrims” on the earth? What does Hebrews say about the danger of backsliding? How are Christians to relate to society? How can we be protected against some of the more common sins and temptations?

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 20.

Sunday

September 14

STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13).

Read carefully the above verse, in the context (of course) in which it was written. Focus especially on the two nouns that describe these faithful people, *strangers* and *pilgrims* (or *exiles*). What do these two words automatically bring to mind? In what ways are Christians to be “strangers and pilgrims” on the earth? See also Job 8:9; Eccles. 1:14; James 4:14. At the same time, how far do you want to take these images? In other words, in what ways should we *not* be strangers and pilgrims?

Pilgrims are people who have left their homes, sometimes even their countries, to go on a journey. At least temporarily, and maybe even permanently, they have broken away from their normal activities, from families and friends. They have a clear purpose, oftentimes purification from sins, and are willing to endure hardship to attain their goal.

Unfortunately, the concept of a pilgrimage often involves the most choking aspects of salvation by works. This is hardly the message of Hebrews, which is talking about a different kind of pilgrim and a different kind of pilgrimage. These pilgrims aren't seeking salvation; salvation has found them, in the person of Jesus, who “was once offered to bear the sins of many” (Heb. 9:28), who “obtained eternal redemption” for them (Heb. 9:12), and who now appears “in the presence of God” (Heb. 9:24) for them. Thus, their journey isn't to find salvation; they already have it. Instead, because they have that great salvation, they follow the One who saved them wherever He bids them go.

Look at Hebrews 9:12, 24-26, and 28 in this specific order. What sequence do you see that gives us the essence of what Christ has done and is doing for us now? Why does salvation by works have no role here?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Hebrews 12:1-3.

Teachers Aims:

1. To define how we are “strangers” and “pilgrims” on the earth (Heb. 11:13).
2. To state the danger of backsliding and explore how we as Christians should relate to society.
3. To learn how we can be protected against both sin and the temptations that beset us daily.

Lesson Outline:

I. Salvation Seeking the Lost.

- A. Christ offered to bear the sins of everyone, regardless of whether he or she sought God or not.
- B. Christ obtained eternal redemption for all, and all are free to accept it.
- C. Christians are not on a pilgrimage to seek salvation; salvation has found them, in the Person of Jesus.

II. Jesus and the Challenges of the Church.

- A. Paul challenges church members to follow Christ and warns them about the danger of apostasy.
- B. Repentance is successful only when we turn from the path of rejecting Jesus.
- C. A full pardon is ours for the asking but is based on the condition we turn away from our rejection of God.

III. Support of a Christian Community.

- A. The church should offer support for believers as they struggle through times both good and bad.
- B. Encouragement helps uplift us when we stumble through the tough times.
- C. Discipline enhances our growth and maturity.

Summary: Even though we are saved and have a commission to spread the gospel, God expects us to take responsibility for the well-being of our Christian community.

Commentary.

It is interesting to see that the apostle Paul calls those from the past “witnesses.” They have borne witness to the faithfulness of God; they were, in a manner of speaking, witnesses to Christ before His incarna-

Monday

September 15

CHRISTIANS AND THEIR LORD (Heb. 12:25).

Why does Hebrews deal so strongly with apostasy? Heb. 6:4-9; 10:26-29; 12:25. What's the common thread among them?

In three major blocks (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:15-17, 25-29), the apostle deals more or less with the same subject. He is concerned that church members may fall away and not be renewed to repentance. In strong words he directly or indirectly challenges them to follow Christ and warns them most distinctly about the danger of apostasy.

William Johnsson points out that all three blocks contain five common elements: (1) privileges, (2) offense, (3) result, (4) prospect of judgment, and (5) reasons for the divine rejection. The author of Hebrews “seems to speak of a deliberate rejection of the gospel, not just a gradual falling away or neglect. And in all three he issues severe warnings—the sternest in the entire New Testament. . . . The apostle describes acts of wanton rejection, of overt defiance of Jesus as Lord. No suggestion of a sin of omission or weakness here. . . . Because Hebrews exalts the cross in such glowing terms, because it shows so emphatically its superlative worth, it must point out the horror of a deliberate rejection.”—Johnsson, *In Absolute Confidence*, pp. 143, 145–148.

Hebrews 6:4-6 presents some great challenges, because on face value it seems to teach that someone who had once known the power and majesty of God's salvation and then turned away could never again be saved. How, though, is this to be interpreted in contrast, for instance, with Luke 15:11-32, the story of the prodigal, or with all the other places in the Bible where the Lord calls backsliders to repentance?

Perhaps it needs to be understood in the sense that it is impossible to turn them back to repentance *as long as they continue in their blatant and open rejection of Christ*. This idea is congruent with the rest of Scripture, which time and again deals with the Lord pleading with those who have fallen into apostasy to return to Him, for He will pardon and cleanse *but only if they turn away from their rejection of Him*. As long as someone remains in rebellion, refusing to change, even God can't bring him or her back. (See Matt. 24:37-39.) The sanctity of free will carries some powerful and fearful consequences.

What hope can you give to someone who is struggling because a loved one has walked away from the Lord? What other texts can you find that help put those here in Hebrews in their proper perspective with the overall tenor of Scripture?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

tion, for they lived in the goodness of that promise that has been realized in Him.

As a witness, the Christian ought to live the life of a hero. The one who becomes a witness (*martureo*) contends in a contest of faith. The prize with which the martyrs are crowned is eternal life.

So, in the Christian contest, the prize is for all who compete lawfully and run with patient endurance. "So run," said the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, "that you may obtain it" (1 Cor. 9:24, NKJV).

There are two important elements that need to be considered: (1) the Christian's character and (2) the way the Christian ought to live.

I. The Christian Character: Perseverance.

The Christian is the one who is fit and ready to run the race that is set before each of us and to do so with perseverance. One of the main problems with the Hebrew Christians to whom this letter is addressed is that they have set out on the race but, after a good start (Heb. 10:32-34), are now slackening in the will to persevere; their effort is decreasing (Heb. 2:1), sin is holding them back. They need to recover their intensity of purpose (Heb. 4:11), to shake off the sluggish mood into which they have fallen, and to regain their confidence and their competitive spirit. They should remember they are engaging in a contest of the utmost seriousness, and their goal belongs not to the realm of time but of eternity.

More specifically, the Christian contestants need to separate themselves from the sin that clings so closely to them. It is precisely sin, of whatever kind, that impedes or slows down the Christian in the spiritual race. Conversely, anything, however innocent in itself, which impedes or slows down the Christian in the spiritual race is for that reason sinful and must, with God's help, be discarded.

Indeed, perseverance is itself an integral part of the daily spiritual contest. As the apostle Paul says, the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh (Gal. 5:17). In the end, only one wins.

II. The Christian Life: The Race.

The analogy of the athlete used by Paul is very important. The athletes must discipline themselves. There are many things that may be perfectly all right in their own right but that hinder a competitor in the race of faith. They are weights that must be laid aside. It may well be that what is a hindrance to one entrant in this spiritual contest is not a hindrance to another; individuals must learn for themselves what in their case is a weight or an impediment. But there are other things that are not perfectly all right in their own way but are essentially wrong and thus must, without equivocation, be discarded.

The apostle Paul is not referring so much to some specific besetting sin, in the common use of the phrase, but to sin itself, as

Tuesday

September 16

CHRISTIANS AND SOCIETY.

However much Hebrews focuses on Christ and His work in the heavenly sanctuary, this focus has a human element, as well. It has to. After all, if Christ's death and high-priestly ministry were for us, then how can they not impact us, even now?

Thus, the assurance, the hope, the promises that we have been given through Christ's death and high-priestly ministry *of necessity* impact how we live, how we treat others, how we deal with those with whom we daily come in contact. Though deeply theological and dealing with, literally, heavenly things, Hebrews also touches on the personal, the individual, the character, and the lives of those who are living the life of faith as expressed in Hebrews 11. Indeed, the litany of people in Hebrews 11 shows how greatly faith impacts personal behavior.

Look up Hebrews 12:14; 13:1-5, 16, 17. What is the apostle telling them to do? What kind of personal relationships is he talking about here?

Notice the parallel between Hebrews 12:14 and some of Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount. According to Matthew 5:9, Christians not only avoid frictions, rivalry, and war; they actively get involved trying to make peace. Thus, they serve their society and work toward its improvement. In other words, we need to be involved. Though strangers, though pilgrims, we still are strangers and pilgrims *here*, and while here, while passing through, we need to leave our mark, to let our light shine.

In addition, the apostle mentions hospitality, which is not restricted to church members only. Christians take care of those at the margins of society—the outcasts, the prisoners, and those ill-treated. To care for those groups means to identify to a certain degree with them, exactly as Jesus did when He was in the flesh.

Read carefully Hebrews 13:16. The word translated “communicate” comes from a Greek word that has the meaning of “fellowship,” “close, personal relationship,” and “sharing.” Notice, too, how the author calls these things that he asks us to do “sacrifices.” What image does that bring up? How does that fit in with the theme of Hebrews? At the same time, why do these things require a “sacrifice” on our part?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

something that inevitably gets in the way of the runners' feet and trips them up before they have taken more than a step or two. Anything that distracts athletes from the contest in which they are competing will quickly put them out of the running.

Everything that would impede them or divert their attention must, therefore, be put away, and the athletes must keep their eyes fixed on the goal toward which they are pressing. Those who run become witnesses in the Christian sense. They must keep their eyes fixed on God and endure torments even unto death. He exhorts his readers to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends, from start to finish.

In our Christian race, God chastises us for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness and yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:8, 10-12). Divine rebuke is a compassionate sign that God deals with us as sons and daughters, adopted from the orphanage

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Genesis 47:9; Matthew 7:22, 23; John 7:40-43; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; 1 Peter 2:11; 1 John 3:15-17.

1. Followers of Jesus Christ are described as "pilgrims" in the book of Hebrews. Given that the author is not literally urging us to make pilgrimages, what do you think is meant? Why might a pilgrimage be a good metaphor for the Christian life?
2. Hebrews suggests Christians should feel motivated to good works and character improvement by awareness of the high price paid for our salvation. Why aren't believing Christians, in fact, more excited by this? What do you think would make people more aware?
3. Even while discussing the power and finality of Christ's sacrifice, Hebrews 6:4-6 acknowledges the possibility that even a previously believing Christian can lose salvation by taking it for granted. Is it possible to reject God without being aware one has done so?
4. Hebrews and many other biblical texts urge us to do good works for those outside the church, as well as for those within. Is this separate from our duty to spread the good news of Christ? How is it related?
5. Much of the New Testament, including the book of Hebrews, stresses the necessity for Christians to participate in the church community in a constructive way. In what way does community life prepare the Christian for life in the world to come?

Wednesday

September 17

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

Hebrews 10:19-25 presents a great example of how what happens in heaven should have an impact on earth. Follow the line of thought in the verses. First, in verses 19-21, the emphasis is on Jesus in heaven and what He has done that allows us “access” to the Father. Second (vss. 22, 23), as a result of what Christ has done, our inner selves, our hearts, can be changed because we have assurance and hope through Jesus if we hold fast. Finally, because of Jesus (vss. 24, 25), we live a different life, one in which we are ministering to others, sharing from what we ourselves have been given in Christ. Thus, he goes from Christ in heaven to the Christian community on earth.

How does the element of Christian community fit in with the verses below? How can the community help in each instance?

Heb. 12:15 _____

Heb. 13:1-3 _____

Heb. 13:7, 17 _____

Heb. 13:9 _____

Heb. 13:18 _____

The Christian church is like a family. Already in New Testament times Christians would call one another brothers and sisters. They formed the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19), God’s family. In a family it is quite natural to take care of one another, to encourage one another, and sometimes even to confront one another in order to enhance growth and maturity.

Nobody can be a Christian in isolation unless forced by difficult situations, such as persecution and dispersion. We need one another. Jesus has instituted His church, in which we need to get involved, find friendships, develop our gifts, and corporately meet our Lord.

Why do we need one another in the church? Why does the Bible stress the idea of a Christian community? How has fellowship as a whole helped you? Or has it?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

of sin. If we endure His correction, we are His children. But if we reject His rebukes, then, spiritually speaking, we are illegitimate children, born outside of wedlock, who don't know their Father or carry His name and have no right to His inheritance.

In medieval times, illegitimate birth was considered shameful in the extreme, believed to be the product of lust and the devil. An illegitimate child bore the stigma of such a sinful birth all the days of his or her life. The child could not call himself by his father's name, even if the father was known. Nor could such a child claim any part of his or her father's inheritance. So strong is the stigma against illegitimate birth that even to this day in many cultures the common word is considered profane or foul.

In medieval times a king had the power to reverse illegitimacy. The medieval mind-set endowed their kings not only as sovereigns but as the fathers of the realm. Thus, a king could legitimize anyone he chose and give him or her a surname. This is what the King of heaven does for us. Through Christ, God grafts us into the heavenly family tree and adopts us into the heavenly family. We become the sons and daughters of God, our lives legitimized through the new-birth experience, and joint heirs with Christ.

WITNESSING

Many new believers come into the church and, after a short period of time, they leave or stop coming. There are some very specific things that can be done to prevent this from happening. But it may require a little effort and attention from those who seem to be rooted and grounded in the faith. Witnessing is more than just speaking the words of truth. Reaching out to others in fellowship and to encourage them in their Christian walk can also be a form of witnessing. Fellowship should go beyond a warm greeting and friendly handshake.

Many people in the church feel alone and do not have the support of friends and family. They look to the church for support in their spiritual growth and hope to find friends among church members. As fellow believers, we should fel-

lowship with one another outside of regular church services. We should pray and study together more, form witnessing teams, talk to one another during the week, and fellowship together socially. Many of us already do these things. But let us not leave out the new believers or those who attend only sometimes. The Lord has promised that "where two or three are gathered together in [His] name," He will be "in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

Even those who believe they are rooted and grounded in the faith could be in danger of falling away from the truth. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Witnessing and reaching out to others can also serve to strengthen our own faith.

Thursday

September 18

SEX AND MONEY.

“Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:4, 5).

In the two verses listed above, what two points are touched on?

In verse 4 the apostle stresses the importance and sanctity of marriage and warns against a misuse of the sexual powers. “When the divine principles are recognized and obeyed in this relation, marriage is a blessing; it guards the purity and happiness of the race, it provides for man’s social needs, it elevates the physical, the intellectual, and the moral nature.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 25. “Whoremongers and adulterers” may describe two different groups. Adulterers are married persons who maintain a sexual relationship with someone who is not their spouse. Whoremongers, or, may in this context, refer to unmarried individuals that have sexual contact with another person.

Another area of temptation has to do with money. What is the apostle saying in verse 5 that’s so important in regard to how we deal with the question of money and possessions, in general? How does the Bible text he quotes help defend against this dangerous allurements?

Money, or at least the love of money, can do strange things to people. Unless we’re on guard, even Christians can get swept away by what Jesus called “the deceitfulness of riches” (Mark 4:19).

Jesus was once asked to intervene when two brothers fought for their inheritance. “ ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’ ” (Luke 12:15, NRSV). We would do well to heed those words, especially when we tend to measure the worth or quality of our lives by what possessions we do or do not have.

Look at the Bible promise quoted at the end of Hebrews 13:5. How do we understand what the promise means in daily life? It’s one thing to quote it and say that you believe it. But how does this belief impact how we live, especially in times of adversity and temptation?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: The Bible summarizes the life of Enoch very simply—“Enoch walked with God” (Gen. 5:24). Folklore, however, tells us that Enoch had a more calculated life. “Legend tells that with Enoch the Angel of Death made a compact of friendship. Enoch made three requests of him. First, to die and come back again so that he might know what death was like. Second, to see the abode of the wicked so that he might know what the punishment of the evil was like. Both these requests were granted. His third request was to be permitted to see into Paradise so that he might see what the blessed enjoyed. This also was granted, but Enoch, having been granted a glimpse of Paradise, never came back to earth again.”
—William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study: The Letter to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, Penn.: The Westminster Press, 1976, revised edition), p. 134.

Thought Question:

Epicurus said, “God does nothing.” Like Epicurus, there are many who, while believing in the existence of God, think of Him as Someone who sits up there in heaven and does nothing, as Someone who doesn’t care. What are the advantages of a religion

that believes in a God who cares? Find verses in the Bible that speak of God’s love. How does belief in a caring God motivate spiritual growth?

Application Questions:

1. In a true love relationship, love takes precedence over calculations of self-gain. When you measure a relationship by what you gain from it, you have lost the essence of love. What disadvantages does someone with a history of abuse have when seeking a secure relationship with God? How can you disciple someone with such a history? What, if any, is the harm when people seek God primarily for what they can get for themselves—affirmation, love, security, assurance?
2. Not all of us are gifted to disciple and nurture. What else can we do to enrich the Christian walk of one another? Suppose a stranger visiting your church sits next to you. The service is about five minutes from starting. You want to make the most of the opportunity but do not know what to talk about. What can you do? Think of some icebreakers to ease the silence.

Friday

September 19

FURTHER STUDY: Study the life of Paul as presented in the letter to the Philippians and how his way of life and teaching reported there correspond with the topic for this week.

Note: A man in the army of Alexander the Great was named Alexander; he was also accused of cowardly actions. He was brought before Alexander, who asked his name. The man replied softly, “Alexander.” “I can’t hear you,” the ruler stated. The man again said, a little louder, “Alexander.” The process was repeated one more time, after which Alexander the Great commented, “Either change your name or change your conduct.”

“All who are made partakers of His salvation here, and who hope to share the glories of the kingdom hereafter, must gather with Christ. Each must feel that he is responsible for his own case, and for the influence he exerts over others. If these maintain their Christian walk, Jesus will be in them the hope of glory, and they will love to speak forth His praise. . . . The cause of their Master will be near and dear to them. It will be their study to advance His cause and to honor it by holy living. Said the angel: ‘Every talent God will require with usury.’ Every Christian must go on from strength to strength, and employ all his powers in the cause of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 179.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. Though the book of Hebrews deals with heavy theological issues, everything from the incarnation of Christ to His heavenly ministry in our behalf, the book does clearly have a practical side. In other words, theology does not exist in a vacuum. It should impact how we live. Discuss why this is so.**
- 2. Study Hebrews 12:14. What does that mean? How do we understand this text in the context of righteousness by faith?**
- 3. Though in the end we are saved only as individuals, what role and responsibility does the community have toward the spiritual well-being of its members?**

SUMMARY: Though this earth isn’t our final home, it’s where we are now, it’s where we live now, and God expects us to live according to the high calling that we have in Jesus Christ.