

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.

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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.



Struggling Toward the Light

Kereta Milo

Puataunofu (Pua) is the daughter of the village chief in a remote village on the westernmost point of Samoa. While the people in Pua’s village claim to be Christians, they believe in spirits and visit the witch doctor when they are ill.

Pua completed primary school and moved to a larger town to continue her studies. She worked for a local priest to earn a little money and considered it a privilege to serve her church this way.

Pua finished school and found work in a factory. There she met Filemu. They settled down to a life of nightclubs and dancing. Filemu had grown up Adventist, and he could not shake off the beliefs he had grown up with. He tried to share his faith with Pua, but she was not interested.

One night they noticed a tent meeting nearby. Filemu wanted to go to the meetings, but Pua did not. However, during the second week, she finally agreed to go. She liked the music and found the speaker’s topic compelling. She agreed to attend the meetings.

When the pastor spoke on the change of the Sabbath, she stayed late to ask him difficult and troubling questions. As Pua read the notes they received each night, she realized that what the pastor said was true.

When the pastor spoke on the importance of marriage, Pua and Filemu asked the pastor to marry them. And after the series of meetings ended, Pua and Filemu were baptized along with 77 others.

The young couple became active in the church. Filemu led the youth programs and served as an elder in the church. Pua worked in Sabbath School.

When Pua told her parents that they had become Seventh-day Adventist Christians, they became angry that she left the family’s religion. At Christmas, the couple returned to her village to tell her

parents that they planned to study for the ministry at Fulton College in Fiji. They expected more anger and asked God to prepare the way. The family was happy with their decision.

Pua and Filemu thank God for patiently leading them to His truth.



Pua and Filemu (left) are students at Fulton College. Kereta Milo is a pastor living in Samoa.

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