

THE WALK 1

Some practical questions ...

Do I have a present trust in Christ for salvation?
Is there evidence of a regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in my heart?
Do I see a long-term pattern of growth in my Christian life?

Do I love Jesus more today than I did, or is my love for him cooler now than it used to be?
Is that significant? why/why not?

What are the things that weigh me down in following Jesus?
Am I laying aside everything that might hinder me in running the race?
Are there things I need to 'cut off' or 'tear out' (cf Mark 9:43-48)?

Am I reading the stories of godly men and women in the OT as witnesses that keeping going is worth it?
Am I reading Christian biographies as witnesses that keeping going is worth it?

Am I giving time to 'consider Jesus' ... for he is the example of endurance?
Are there ways that I could see and savour Jesus more?

Am I looking to the future joy that is set before me, and persevering in obedience through suffering and shame to enter into that glory?
How can I 'desire a heavenly country' (11:16) more?

Are there Christians who are seeing to it that I don't 'fail to obtain the grace of God' (12:15a)? am I doing that for any other Christians?

THE WALK 1

Keeping going

Hebrews 12:1-4

The theme of this study

There are lots of places where the NT describes the Christian life as walking (eg Gal 5:16; Eph 4:1; 1 John 1:7). In this series, we're trying to unpack what 'the walk' involves.

This first study is about the theme of 'endurance' ... if you like, keeping going on a walk that is more like a challenging long-distance hike than a Sunday afternoon stroll! The theological term for this is **the perseverance of the saints** which means that *all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians to the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again* (W.Grudem: Systematic Theology).

The danger is that we may impose a list of 'works' as the measure of whether a Christian is persevering. Grudem is helpful in suggesting three questions a person could ask him/herself, rather than relying on external signs of conversion, which could well be present in an unbeliever who finally falls away:

- do I have a present trust in Christ for salvation?
- is there evidence of a regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in my heart?
- do I see a long-term pattern of growth in my Christian life?

The book of Hebrews

Hebrews is 'a word of exhortation ... a short letter' (13:22) written to those who had been active as Christians for a while, but who had begun to 'drift away' (2:1) from their original commitment. It seems as if the original readers were converted from Judaism, and their drift now was not into worldliness, but back into religion, wanting the sights, sounds and smells that make it all seem much more 'real'. Although Christian faith may seem less real, it is actually 'the real thing' whereas (OT) religion was always just the 'shadow of the good things to come' in Jesus (10:1). So, the writer warns of the dangers of rejecting God, and urges them to hold fast to the Lord Jesus, God's Son and our Priest.

Hebrews 11 is a list of people from the OT who did not 'shrink back' (10:38-39) as the original readers were in danger of doing. Instead, they had faith, which is (in Heb 11) virtually the same as 'hope' ... looking ahead to what we don't yet have and don't yet see, but which we are confident God has promised. People with faith could endure the most dreadful experiences (even being 'sawn in two' 11:37). And they could even endure really good experiences (like living in 'the land of promise' [11:9]) or do mighty acts of bravery (11:32-35) without thinking that those things were 'it'. Good or bad experiences ... what they had in common was that they were looking forward to 'the better country, that is, a heavenly one' (11:16), keeping going now for the 'something better' (11:40).

Group study outline

Introduction

A young Christian tells you that they're thinking of giving up because they're finding that the Christian life is just too hard: what would you say?

What do you think are the threats for you in keeping going as a Christian (eg doubts, isolation, opposition, hardship, ... etc)?

It is often hard to keep going as a Christian.

The writer of *Hebrews* gives us two examples to help us persevere.

READ Hebrews 11:32-12:4

What are the two examples he refers to?

Who is this 'great cloud of witnesses'? (cf context of what chapter 11 is about)

What was their experience (according to 11:32-38)?

What is their example to us (cf 11:39-40)?

OPTIONAL EXTRA:

READ Hebrews 11:13-16

What is the 'something better' (11:40) that God has provided for us?

How will the prospect of 'our heavenly country' help us persevere?

How are these OT heroes 'witnesses'? how is their witness encouraging for us?

What was Jesus' experience?

Go through these verses in some detail: make a list of the steps in them.

How is he an example to us?

Of course, we haven't experienced anything like the hostility Jesus endured: why does verse 4 refer that fact?

What am I to do, according to these verses? how do I 'look to and consider him'?

Look at verse 2. What should I do about things that hinder me in the race?

What might be examples of such 'weights' and 'sin' that puts my keeping going at risk?

How practically do I lay these things aside?

What have been the greatest threats to my persevering in the past year?

What have I done about such threats?

What should have been my response according to these verses? why would that have helped?

12:12-15 is another encouragement to keep going. But verse 15 puts the onus on all of us to check up on one another. How could we do that better?

Conclusion

What does this passage tell us about keeping going?

What has surprised you in this passage about how to keep going?

Why do you think the focus is 'looking to Jesus' rather than a list of things to do?

Theme Sentence

The examples of 'people of old' and of Jesus provide encouragement for us to keep going as Christians.

Argument of this passage in its context

The writer has explained the need for persevering faith (10:35-39) and described its character (11:1-40) as part of his repeated warnings to those who had seemingly started well in the Christian life, but were now in danger of shrinking back (2:1-5; 3:7-4:12; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-31). In this 'race' (12:1) – a marathon rather than a sprint – the 'cloud of witnesses' (12:1), that is, the 'people of old' (11:1) listed in chapter 11, and the work and example of Christ should be reflected on (12:2-3) so that both individually (12:1) and corporately (12:12-13) nothing be allowed to interfere with our race to heaven.

The cloud of witnesses (12:1)

The first encouragement to press on in faith is 'being surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses'. The idea here is not so much that the great 'people of old' (11:1) are 'watching us from the grandstand' (Living Bible) (- we might find that rather discouraging: 'dear old Moses, I know you mean to be an encouragement, but did you have to come to watch?!'). Rather, they are giving witness to us ... these real flesh and blood examples witness to us that keeping going is worth it. The witness to us later generations is the approval of their actions and experiences received whilst they ran.

The author and perfecter of faith (12:2-4)

The second encouragement to persevere in faith comes from thinking hard about the work and example of Christ. As in 2:10, the idea is of a 'leader', 'pathfinder' and 'pioneer' who has gone ahead of his people. Salvation for his people was won as he trod the path of obedience and endured the hardship that resulted (2:10; 5:7-9). Both he and the Hebrews are of the same family (2:11) and those who would benefit from his work need to follow in his footsteps, at least in some measure (12:3-4 cf 5:9 'for all who obey him'). So, as the perfect example of faith, we see that Jesus looked to the future and the joy that awaited (2) and persevered in obedience through suffering and shame (3) to enter into that glory (2).

How will we not 'lose heart and grow faint'? The answer here is that we need to reflect on these things: '*Jesus humiliated*' offers Christians the supreme example of endurance whenever they experience humiliation. '*Jesus vindicated*' and '*enthroned*' provides certainty that Christians will also be vindicated when they demonstrate the necessary endurance which validates the life of committed faithfulness' (W.Lane Hebrews).

In 12:4, the writer isn't blaming them for their failure to resist to the point of shedding blood, but shaming them: their sufferings are much less than Jesus had to bear and yet they are apparently ready to give up. (The 'sin' in 12:4 is identical to the 'sinners' in 12:3, but different from the 'sin' in 12:1 [which refers to the power that is trying to stop us believing and make us disobey]).