

Just Checking In - Principles for Pilgrims Hebrews 12

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JCI August 15, 2009 Principles for Pilgrims from Hebrews 12

I just returned from a week on the Appalachian Trail in the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. It was a delight to accompany twenty-two teens and four men, including my favorite son-in-law, Pastor Dan Francis, on a five day pilgrim journey up and down that wonderful stretch of mountainous terrain. As the undisputed geezer on this trip, I had the joy of sharing “**Principles for Pilgrims**” from Hebrews twelve, three times daily. Reading the chapter from the vantage point of a travelling pilgrim (its actual context!) the principles are obvious. I apologize for the unusual length of this JCI, but it seemed best to share it in total, unbroken.

Ps 39:12 "Hear my prayer, O LORD... for I am a pilgrim with You...

Ps 84:5 Blessed is the man whose strength is in You; whose heart is set on pilgrimage...

Ps 119:19 I am a pilgrim on this earth; Do not hide Your commandments from me...

Heb 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were convinced they were true, embraced them and confessed that they were...pilgrims...

1Pe 2:11 Beloved, I beg you as pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against your souls...

Five Principles for Pilgrims from Hebrews Chapter 12

Your Choice: Pilgrim or a Prisoner

To be a prisoner requires nothing. To be a pilgrim requires everything you've got and more!

#1 Your Guide – “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith”

Who you follow determines both your direction and your eventual destination. *What you believe is the most important thing about you.* Your core beliefs determine your choices and responses to all of life. And the single most important belief you possess is your belief about God. If you have accurate beliefs regarding the True and Living God, then you will respond to His words with a confident and eager obedience and stay on

the path of pilgrimage. But if your beliefs are inaccurate, then you will stray from His Word, and become a prisoner to fear, mistrust, anger, all manner of lusts and self destructive choices. Effective Pilgrims are wise enough to know when they're hearing good advice, and humble enough to take it and act on it.

Illustration: Moses and Jethro (Hobab) learning from God and men... (Exodus 18)

Moses was God's man. He was the deliverer, prophet, judge, instructor, intercessor and leader of Israel. But he was also teachable! Although He heard directly from the mouth of God, he was willing to take the advice from the mouth of his father-in-law Jethro, about how to improve and structure leadership within the nation. God didn't tell Moses everything at Sinai, nor did He do so directly. He let Moses learn on the journey, both through difficulties and troubles, as well as from his fellow men. Pilgrims need guides: Jesus and other wise fellow pilgrims. Wise pilgrims are teachable. Prisoners are stuck... stuck in their own arrogance and anger... stuck in their own thoughts & habits. Are you teachable? Psalm 81:8; Psalm 119:19 Song: "Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah... pilgrim in this barren land..."

#2 Your Companions – “Pursue peace with all men, and holiness”

Who you walk with will influence your speed, direction and endurance...and theirs too! You will not travel this pilgrimage alone. If you are a pilgrim, will be stretched by your fellow pilgrims. If you're a prisoner, you'll be stuck with your fellow prisoners. Their pace, choices, reactions, and needs will all affect you, and you them. God's purpose in your pilgrimage is not simply for you to reach your ultimate destination. It also includes the growth process that will occur in you through the pilgrimage... your growth and the growth of your fellow pilgrims. There is nothing that will take place in your pilgrimage that cannot be turned to good, and growth, both in your life and the lives of others.

Illustration: David and Ittai the Gittite 2 Sam 15:18-23; 2 Sam 18:2

David lived the life of a fugitive for nearly 10 years, since he refused to fight Saul. David knew that God put Saul in place as king. Therefore, even though David had a right to defend himself, he refused to fight Saul or do him harm even when his friends told him that God had handed Saul over to him for execution. David refused such a suggestion, preferring to remain innocent and pure before God, and suffer the abuse of Saul's unreasoning hatred, rather than defend himself. As a result, David fled to enemy territory for nearly ten years. It would seem perhaps that this decade of exile produced David's closest walk with God. Key Psalms flowed from his heart and pen during these years. God used this uphill season of pilgrimage in David's life in tremendous ways for God's glory. God used this part of David's pilgrimage to give him a heart for the nations and to win over 600 Philistine men from Gath, and their families, to the worship of the true God. Gath, remember, was the city of Goliath. David was a marked man, a known man among them. But instead of earning the rage of the Philistines, David's witness and close walk with God turned the hearts of pagan worshippers of Dagon to become worshippers of Yahweh, the true and living God. These 600 men and their entire families moved to Israel to live near David after his kingship was established. So faithful to God were these Philistine believers, that during Absalom's revolt, Ittai their leader was made captain of one third of David's army. Think of it! A Yahweh worshipping Philistine leading one third of David's army in exile! What effect are you having on others on your pilgrim journey. Don't label a difficult season of the journey as useless or pointless. God has your pilgrimage planned and is using bitter times of storm and rain, wind and cold, and steep mountain climbs to shape you and to use you to connect with others who will, one day, join you on the journey home. Pilgrims make other pilgrims. Prisoners abide

alone. 2 Tim 3:10-17

#3 Your Enemy – “looking carefully lest anyone fall”

We have an enemy who is committed to our failure. His primary weaponry is words. And Satan rarely speaks those words himself. He uses others to speak them for him. The media, the culture, flesh, and sometimes even well meaning friends unwittingly become the mouth piece of the enemy. (Matt 16:21-23) Sometimes close friends tell us what we want to hear, instead of what we need to hear. Because they desire our approval, they sympathize with our sinful attitudes, rather than challenging us to holiness. There will be other voices besides God's voice spoken on this journey. If you can't recognize the difference between the voice of truth and the voice of deception, you will listen to the wrong voice every time! Faithful Pilgrims recognize the enemy and refuse to listen to his words, no matter what the mouthpiece. Those who listen to the wrong voice inevitably become prisoners. The only effective way to overcome the deceiver's words is with the words of God. Fill your mind and soul with God's words. Rehearse them over and over, memorizing and reflecting on them until they fill the ears of your heart and drown out the subtle suggestions of Satan.

Illustration: Jesus and Satan Matt 4; John 6; Mark 3

Jesus was repeatedly attacked by the enemy on His journey to the cross. Satan spoke directly in the desert (Matt 4) and was overcome every time by these words: “It is written...” Satan also enlisted mouth pieces to speak for him. Peter rebuked Jesus for speaking of the coming cross (Matt 16), the crowds spoke of making Jesus a king and so avoid the cross (John 6), and even his own family sought to dissuade Him from his mission. Jesus made it clear that a vital relationship with Him is rooted in listening and obeying His words. (Mark 3). Jesus always overcame the voice of the deceiver, and did so using only the same weapons He makes available to us... the divine Words of scripture and direct access to God in prayer. We, too, can overcome, and must overcome, the voice of the enemy. Two voices, two choices, two consequences... pilgrim or prisoner. The voice you heed determines the choice you make and the destination you reap. 1 Peter 2:11; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 6:10-16

#4 Your Path – “make straight paths for your feet lest that which is lamed be completely dislocated”

The Pilgrim's path is unpredictable, often difficult, usually long, mostly uphill, and unavoidable. Injuries are inevitable given enough time on rough terrain. But injuries need not be permanent. An injury, even a severe sprain, will not cause a pilgrim to become a prisoner unless he makes repeated missteps. The author of Hebrews warns us that sprains require taking the next step very carefully, since a repeated misstep could result in permanent disability (complete dislocation). You will learn a lot about yourself on the journey and much of it will be unpleasant, since you are not as strong as you think you are. Yet, you will also discover you can do more than you ever thought possible. Allow your injuries to make you more careful, more prayerful, and more generous. Make straight paths for your feet! The pilgrim's path is walked one step at a time, so take your next one carefully.

Illustration: Jacob – Exodus 32 Learning to limp by faith.

Jacob was desperate to get the blessing of his father. He sought firstborn status by bartering for it with a meal for his brother, Esau. Family

obligation and covenant kindness demanded that Jacob feed his hungry brother freely, not demand payment. And although Esau, at the time, devalued his status, yet it did not excuse Jacob's lack of generosity and kindness. Then, in spite of the deal, it became evident his dad would not comply. The only way Jacob felt he could obtain his father's blessing was by sinful deception... tricking his dad into giving him the blessing intended for his brother Esau. Although the plan was hatched by his mother, a co-conspirator in the deception, this did not excuse Jacob's willingness to follow this ungodly advice. This then resulted in Esau's wrath against Jacob. Jacob begins a habit of deceiving and being deceived and then running away from conflict. His only desire is blessing and his constant experience is conflict. It is not until he is forced to face God (wrestling with the Angel) and face his brother (Esau and his army of 400) that he is blessed by a dislocated hip that would result in his inability to run away ever again! From that day on, Jacob is the man who gives blessings. He is transformed by God's blessing that may have looked like a cruel injury, but was instead a liberating limp forcing Jacob to trust God and become a man who spreads blessings, instead of a thief trying to steal them. (Esau, Pharaoh, Sons, Grandsons) Your choices and the choices of others are all part of your pilgrimage. Your life is often affected greatly by the choices others make. You are not responsible for the choices of others. But you and I are fully responsible for our choices, including the choice of how we will respond to the choices of others. No one else can make a pilgrim a prisoner. The choice of my being a pilgrim or prisoner is mine to make, And I make it daily, as do you. Prov 3:5-6; Prov 4:20-27

#5 Your Pack – “lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily trips us up”

Only a few things are essential for pilgrims. The journey is difficult and steep. Remember, that whatever you take in your pack that is not essential, may end up being lethal. Extra weight will not only slow you down, it may just stop you altogether. Determine what you need, and then determine not to take more than you need. The purpose of this pilgrim journey is not about having a comfortable camp out with lots of stuff! The purpose of the pilgrimage is progress, both in distance and character. If you forget you're a pilgrim, you'll become a prisoner, weighed down with way too much stuff, keeping you from moving ahead on the pilgrim path God has laid out for you. Pilgrims need to travel light. Pilgrims often become prisoners because they confuse “nice” with “need”.

Illustration: Jonadab, the son of Rechab. 2 Kings 10:15 Jere 35

Jonadab was a godly man who was forced to ride with Jehu and witness the execution of Israel's godless leadership and false prophets. He saw the great evils that greed and wine combined with easy city living had brought about and determined that his family would avoid these evils by following three simple rules... drink no wine, own no property, and live in tents as nomadic herdsmen. 300 years would go by and his descendents in the days of Jeremiah were still following these family traditions, these pilgrim principles. God uses their example of respect for human, family traditions to rebuke the nation for their refusal to follow divine commandments. Jonadab and his descendents teach us the lesson that pilgrims can indeed travel this life counter-culturally, avoiding needless “weight and sins that can easily ensnare us”, and thus remain pilgrims, when the world around us become prisoners. Life may be more difficult for pilgrims, but it is a life of freedom, purpose and joy. So remember, pilgrims make simplicity a priority. Truly, less is more, when you're on pilgrimage. Psalm 39:12