

## Summer 2008 *LifeMatters Learner Guide* August Personal Bible Studies

### Meet the Writer for August

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### August 3 Good News for a Jacked Up World Hebrews 1:1-3

*1Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. 2In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe. 3He is the radiance of His glory, the exact expression of His nature, and He sustains all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

I sat in a design seminar on a Tuesday morning, one of *those* mornings . . . I said to myself, *now when did I think this was a good idea?* I was in Kansas City: a short flight from where I left my brain in Nashville. As the seminar leader threw down pearls of wisdom on design templates using a new software roll-out, I heard three cell phones ring quietly all at the same time. All three phones were silenced as the conference leader grimaced, paused, and gave us all an irritated frown. It was followed by five or six other cell phones. Eventually all cell phones in the seminar were on vibrate. And (I'm not exaggerating) the sound of the cell phone on vibrate made the room sound like some kind of techno-jungle of mechanical toads. Weird. The synchronicity of the whole thing sticks with me to this day. We continued, and so did the phones. Just an ordinary day in a room full of strangers. Right? But there was a voice message for each of us because it was September 11, 2001.

Hebrews, an anonymous masterpiece, begins by reminding us that God has been trying to break through to man for years. The human race needed to hear the truth from people like them so He sent prophets. We needed to hear it miraculously, so He sent His message through mules, on walls, and even by fish barf (Jonah). He even sent us visions, signs in the sky, angels, poems, art, burning bushes, fast food from the sky, parting oceans, and radical wild men. But ultimately He stepped into flesh through His Son. In the prelude to the Book of Hebrews, the writer reminds us that the ultimate message of God is Jesus. And this message marches through history straight to you. And what an incredible message! The mystery writer of Hebrews says, "He is the radiance of His glory" (Hebrews 1:3). God's glory, the complete centrifuge of holiness and power, is personified in Jesus. There's never been anyone like Jesus. Never. It's the glory of God wrapped in skin and filled with everything you need to get through this messed up world, jacked up by sin and death. Jesus has everything you need.

### Not the Brightest One—the Only One Hebrews 1:4-6,10-14

*4So He became higher in rank than the angels, just as the name He inherited is superior to theirs. 5For to which of the angels did He ever say, You are My Son; today I have become Your Father, or again, I will be His Father, and He will be My Son? 6When He again brings His firstborn into the world, He says, And all God's angels must worship Him.*

.....  
*10And: In the beginning, Lord, You established the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; 11they will perish, but You remain. They will all wear out like clothing; 12You will roll them up like a cloak, and they will be changed like a robe. But You are the same, and Your years will never end. 13Now to which of the angels has He ever said: Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool? 14Are they*

*not all ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation?*

If you asked a Buddhist if there would be Buddhism without the teachings of its founder Siddhartha Gautama, his answer would be *yes*, because Buddhism is considered simply a set of teachings that could be discovered by anyone. If you ask a historian if we would have electricity today without the works of Thomas Edison, the historian would chuckle and say, "Of course!" If you ask any flannel regaled, throwback rock historian if the grunge scene would have happened without the music of Kurt Cobain, the answer would be obvious. As certain as Starbucks, Cobain was just one of the angry voices in the Seattle scene of the '90s. But if you ask a Christian if Christianity could have found its voice outside the life of Jesus, the question is absolutely incredulous. Christianity is inseparable from the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you lose the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ you lose everything. Christianity is as much about the sacrifice of God's Son and His resurrection as it is about the teaching before or after Good Friday.

So where are you with the whole Jesus issue? Is He one of the many voices that alter the steps of your life? Is He the poster child for a life well lived? a model to aspire toward? a motto for your personal spiritual mantra? or is He *the only One*? It's the only way He'll do it. He's not an RSS feed into your spiritual world that shows up on your home page. He's not another friend on your MySpace account. He's not a member of your mobile spirituality friends and family plan. You might think He is but He really refused to be that kind of a God. It's an all-or-nothing proposition. The writer of Hebrews uses words like throne, scepter, and angels in his opening comments. He spells it out. Jesus is superior. Period. When it comes to special revelation or higher platitudes or realities, Jesus is it. If you aren't willing to come empty-handed to Him, He's not really interested. If you crave to know the One who created you and is in love with you, He's in. He's all about giving you that and more. But it's an all or nothing proposition. Are you in?

### **The Drifters**

Hebrews 2:1-4

*1We must therefore pay even more attention to what we have heard, so that we will not drift away. 2For if the message spoken through angels was legally binding, and every transgression and disobedience received a just punishment, 3how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was first spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. 4At the same time, God also testified by signs and wonders, various miracles, and distributions of gifts from the Holy Spirit according to His will.*

One of my more harrowing childhood memories harkens back to when I was 7, and I was on an inflatable raft soaking in the sun on a beautiful gulf morning. It seemed as if I had closed my eyes only for a couple of minutes, but when I opened my eyes and scanned for the beach, the people appeared to be like ants, just specs on the horizon. I was adrift and headed for communist Cuba—or so it seemed. That was perhaps the angriest and most relieved I had ever seen my mother. Carelessness and a little shut-eye almost spelled my demise (or so she said). In this insanity called Postmodernity, it's easy to close our eyes and find ourselves adrift. This is the message of the first few verses of Hebrews 2. Don't think that because you close your eyes you won't be held accountable for your destination. What kind of craziness makes us think that God somehow is giving us a free pass to live like everybody else? He's put out the signs: "Spiritual riptides ahead!" "Don't drift." "Hold on!"

When do you find yourself drifting in this culture? Spend a moment with God and do a quick check of your direction. Set your sights on the shore and beware of the spiritual "great whites" just below the surface. It's important.

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### **August 10**

#### **Been There, Done That, Got the Scars**

Hebrews 2:14-18

*14Now since the children have flesh and blood in common, He also shared in these, so that through His death He might destroy the one holding the power of death—that is, the Devil— 15and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death. 16For it is clear that He does not reach out to help angels, but to help Abraham's offspring. 17Therefore He had to be like His brothers in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18For since He Himself was tested and has suffered, He is able to help those who are tested.*

\*Note from the writer: Yes the heading is dated a bit, but it's so true I just couldn't resist.

The Book of Hebrews wastes little time clearing any doubt that Jesus was *not* a ghost, a visual, or some kind of spirit that vaporized at will. Jesus was God wrapped in flesh. And as we all know, this flesh comes with quite a few side effects—like hunger, urges, digestion, a constant need for air, fatigue, special limitations, and stress-induced headaches. He was after all traveling with 12 male young adults. And here was the logic of it all. In order to save the flock, He had to become a lamb. That's how the whole redemption thing works. He didn't just pay the price; He *was* the price for our sin. He was the currency of grace.

Read this passage. Swirl it around in your mouth like a wine taster. Jesus can empathize without predicament of humanity. There is a common thread between Jesus and us: life on earth. He knows what it's like. The words and phrases of humanity are sprinkled liberally throughout this part of Hebrews. Underscore them in your Bible, if you do that sort of thing: "shared" "in common" "like His brothers." Do you catch what the writer is saying? The writer is underscoring the fact that Jesus was flying through this circus of life without a net. Notice: He didn't do this for angels or celestial beings; He did this for you!

What's puzzling you? Hurting you? What is the root of the pain that holds you under, or brings you down, or tears you apart? Jesus is right in there with you! What's the temptation you feel right now? Giving up? Giving in? Jesus says, "I know what it's like." Oh, and lest I forget the most important part of the whole equation, He can help us *today*.

### **But It's a Whole Lot More than Empathy**

Hebrews 3:1,5-6

*1Therefore, holy brothers and companions in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession;*

.....  
*5Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's household, as a testimony to what would be said in the future. 6But Christ was faithful as a Son over His household, whose household we are if we hold on to the courage and the confidence of our hope.*

Christ's walk to the cross is much, much more than empathy. Some Christ followers might be tempted to look at Hebrews and the story of Jesus with a slightly skewed take. Some might see Jesus as a wise Grandfather who shakes His head and says, "You know sonny boy, when I was your age . . ." But that's not what the writer is communicating. And He's not some high-minded therapist egging on the tears saying, "Let it out . . ."

On the contrary, Jesus says, "Look at how I lived My life in on the terra firma and follow." "Follow you? How am I supposed to live like that?" the Christian asks. Jesus replies, "Because I'm coming along. In fact, I'm in you. You are possessed by Me." We've got everything we need to make the right choices, to have a life of adventure, to dance the victory dance, and to walk through death's door with strutting confidence.

We have a calling on us that we carry deep in our bones. Some of us are so connected to the world, relationships, and culture that the voice is muffled, even gagged. But it's plain in Scripture, specifically these verses in Hebrews, that we are being called to march to the beat of a different drum. He's urging us to hold onto Him with a firm grip and ignore the droning ding-a-long of the world's secular cathedrals. What are a few areas of your world that cause you to lack confidence? What sounds do you need to run from in order to center yourself in Christ? Where do you need to go to experience Christ in His natural habitat?

### **The Rest of the Story**

Hebrews 3:7-14

*7Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: Today, if you hear His voice, 8do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the desert, 9where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works 10for 40 years. Therefore I was provoked with this generation and said, "They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known My ways." 11So I swore in My anger, "They will not enter My rest." 12Watch out, brothers, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. 13But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception. 14For we have become companions of the Messiah if we hold firmly until the end the reality that we had at the start.*

The body of Christ (by that I mean the church) is awash with spiritually preoccupied Christians. Somewhere

along the way we've been sold a bill of goods that busyness is next to godliness, and that we can have all the trappings of righteousness without a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus. That's crazy-talk, and it has been around since Moses. Literally.

The writer of Hebrews rewinds to the earliest days of Israel when they were a group of people rather than a territory with boundaries. God's power wasn't a theory. Think about all that great movie fodder—parting seas, water from rocks, fire on the mountain—all acts of God in Spielberg proportions. When all those astounding, holy, fantastic moments were happening all around them, the Israelites were sneaking around, worshiping idols, fighting each other, and acting like Americans. Simply put, they were stubborn, hard-hearted people. All they had to do was rest in the reality and power of God. But they craved to worship their own craft. They melted gold to make calves. They complained about the menu. They hoarded treasures, and they promoted their own treadmill, me-first existence. In other words, they had Egypt on the brain. Can you relate to that? I can. The pagan culture surrounds us, and we begin to smell like it. We act like it. Aspiring to be successful we forget what is right. So invigorated by the thought that we could, we don't stop to ask ourselves if we should. Our heart grows distant. Our soul cracks open and the world spills out of us. We are spiritually brittle.

How have you gone astray in your heart? Is a strong heart the same as a hard heart? Do you have idols that you need to show out of the tent so you can have a tender heart toward Jesus?

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### **August 17** **It's Time to Grow Up** Hebrews 5:11-14

*11We have a great deal to say about this, and it's difficult to explain, since you have become slow to understand. 12For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of God's revelation. You need milk, not solid food. 13Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. 14But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil.*

We are constantly in a learning environment. With the advent of technology, you can either jump on the bus or get left behind. We're all challenged to be lifelong learners and growers. Sadly most people in churches today reach a certain level of spiritual maturity and then, perhaps out of the strange delusion that they have "arrived," quit growing in their faith and the practice of it. I don't know. Maybe it's the feeling that spiritual growth is like the physical growth cycle. Some may theorize that after a year or two of studying the Bible, they've done all the growing they really need. It's nonsense!

Spiritual growth has no particular end. It's organic. It's constant. Amazingly elders, believers, and churchgoers still act with great immaturity if they don't get the music they want or if they don't get the position they want or if they are angry with the leadership of the church. Often these growth-stunted believers disconnect and remain stagnant. They will gossip, complain, or threaten to cause trouble. This style of Christianity is frustrating and ancient. In fact, the Book of Hebrews addresses this problem.

The writer of Hebrews laments: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of God's revelation. You need milk, not solid food" (Hebrews 5:12). In other words, the writer is asking, "Why are we still having to change your spiritual diapers and breast-feed you with coom-by-yas and bumper sticker theology. How can I teach you about the deep riches of grace, spiritual depth, and suffering if you're still stuck on suing each other and having sex outside of marriage? Why are you still spitting up on the church floor? Why do you need someone to rock you to sleep with your favorite lullaby?" The writer says, "It's time to grow up!"

What areas of your faith are growth-stunted? In what realms are you still where you were five years ago? prayer, evangelism, purity, Bible study, worship, service/good works? Perhaps you've even regressed back into old world patterns. If that's the case, it's not hard to get back on track. You've just got to run to Jesus and ask Him to relight the pilot and get the fire burning again.

### **Let's Go Without Looking Back** Hebrews 6:1-9

*1Therefore, leaving the elementary message about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, faith in God, 2teaching about ritual washings, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3And we will do this if God permits. 4For it is impossible to renew to repentance those who were once enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, became*

*companions with the Holy Spirit, 5tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, 6and who have fallen away, because, to their own harm, they are recrucifying the Son of God and holding Him up to contempt. 7For ground that has drunk the rain that has often fallen on it, and that produces vegetation useful to those it is cultivated for, receives a blessing from God. 8But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and about to be cursed, and will be burned at the end. 9Even though we are speaking this way, dear friends, in your case we are confident of the better things connected with salvation.*

Reading chapter 6 reminds me of the story of Lot's family in the Book of Genesis. Have you heard it before? If you haven't, here's a quick summary: God's going to destroy two cities for despicable sexual acts with children, same-sex stuff, and for participating in other pagan acts—such as child sacrifice. This was just run-of-the-mill stuff for these two towns, and God had had enough of it. There was, however, a righteous family. The dad's name was Lot. And God allowed them to escape the fireworks, but He warned them not to look back. Lot's wife did look back and she didn't escape. The writer of Hebrews has the same warning to His audience, "Don't look back!"

This is a really tough passage that has been the subject of debate for a little less than 2,000 years. Some people have thought this short passage was proof that you could lose your salvation. There's a massive load of Scripture that drives home the message that salvation is a gift from God, performed by God, and received by humans, so that makes the argument faulty. God's love is unconditional. What this text does say is that we must be very careful to join God fully (not taste, but receive it into your life). This is serious. Evidently there were some Jewish people who dabbled in the idea of Jesus as Messiah, tasting what it was like but never fully surrendering to Jesus and then falling back into the "salvation by self-righteousness" mode. The writer of Hebrews is saying, "Don't go there! Don't look back!"

When are you most likely to doubt your salvation? Is that voice God's voice or Satan's? Satan makes it his hobby to accuse, shame, and condemn believers who are stuck in a cycle of sin. His words are harsh. Satan asks, "How can you really be a Christian and commit that sin? God doesn't love you. How could He?" I want to encourage you not to give him the opportunity by living on the edge of God's kingdom. Move forward and don't look back.

### **Don't Stand by the Punch Bowl**

Hebrews 6:10-12

*10For God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you showed for His name when you served the saints—and you continue to serve them. 11Now we want each of you to demonstrate the same diligence for the final realization of your hope, 12so that you won't become lazy, but imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and perseverance.*

She was beautiful, and it was Senior Prom. Being a good Southern Baptist, I didn't really come to the prom to dance—just a picture for memories and a tuxedo evening . . . My date had already gone home. It was a bit complicated. In truth the night was dreadful until another girl much further up the social stratosphere sashayed toward the punch bowl where I was standing. She smiled that perfect smile and looked at me with those baby-blues. This girl with whom I'd had perhaps two conversations containing more than 50 words apiece, asked me, "Wanna dance?" I wish I could say that I answered based on some high moral reasoning, but that would be a lie. For whatever reason I mumbled a regretful decline of her offer. It would have been the perfect movie ending to the memorable, comedy of errors I recall today. Instead the moment passed, and I went home wondering why I didn't dance. I'll always remember the evening that ended my high school years.

The writer of Hebrews concludes this charge by pleading for us not to stand by the punch bowl. The great dance of life is now in our hands, and we have a chance to celebrate, work, and live with great love. Be diligent! He says. Don't be lazy, passive spectators. He's watching to see how you live out His love in this world. The saints of old are in the stands. It's your turn.

*Lord, wake me up from the slumber of laziness. I don't want to be a spectator watching Your kingdom come all around me. I want to be a part of the plan!*

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### **August 24**

#### **Must Wear Bells?**

Hebrews 10:19-23

*19Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus, 20by the*

*new and living way that He has inaugurated for us, through the curtain (that is, His flesh); 21and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, 22let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. 23Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.*

"First of all, you must wear bells—because how are we supposed to know that God didn't strike you down when you walked in the room? You'll only go in there once a year, and when you do, you'll be representing the whole nation—every act of theft, murder, and bad hair day. It'll all be atoned on that one day. And be careful! Please! . . . We don't want to have to go down the depth chart looking for someone to go in there after you if you get struck down. It's traumatizing to the whole nation when things like that happen!"

I don't know if that's exactly the way the conversation went among the Jewish priests when they were breaking in the latest rookie high priest in the Hebrew faith—probably not, but maybe. Certainly it must have been a given that the high priest needed to have his spiritual ducks in a row before he walked in there. It was, after all, the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was disturbed only once a year when the blood of a goat was sprinkled on the mercy seat. There was a thick veil that separated the people from the Holy of Holies. It had to be that way because God is holy and we are not. But when Jesus came and lived a perfect life that changed *everything!*

The veil in every way—physically, spiritually, mentally, metaphorically—completely tore the separating threads between man and a holy God. It changed our identity because Jesus put Himself in our place. As a result, we are found to be clean and satisfactory in God's eyes. It changed our future; we're eternally forgiven and pass through death confidently. It changed our relationship; He's still holy and we're still a work in progress, but we get to enter His presence as a beloved child. Jesus changed everything!

No more wondering if there's something we forgot to ask forgiveness for that would spell our doom! No more running scared like the cowardly lion before the great Oz. Our identity has changed. He's still holy, but because of Christ, we can come to Him boldly. What words best describe how you approach God: timidly, worried, fearful, rarely, worshipfully, thankfully, angrily, confidently, remorsefully. *Lord, teach me how to approach You with the confidence I need to ask for the strength and the faith to perform God-sized tasks.*

### **Mix Ingredients Thoroughly**

Hebrews 10:24-25

*24And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, 25not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

You're enjoying a great home cooked meal with new friends. The steak was incredible, the baked potato topped generously with every possible add-on, and fresh fruit. Then your friends announce that they've got a cake baking in the oven. When they pull it out, you notice a number of small tin containers. In each container is a different ingredient—sugar in one, cocoa in the other, flour in yet another, steaming hot milk in another, salt in a small thimble, melted butter in yet another. Your new friend explains, "We like to keep ingredients segregated."

Nonsense right? It's an even greater absurdity to embrace the idea that you can be a part of God's plan and never mix with the other ingredients. We all bring something to the table, and so it's important that we connect and mix. Paul the apostle says it like this: "For as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

One trend within the 21st century church could be called "Island Christianity." Families and couples believe they don't really need organized church. Instead they prefer to meet another friend or family at a restaurant to discuss a book, pray, and meet next week. While we need those intimate times of fellowship, we miss the power of group. A small group can do more. The more believers, the more gifts, the more energy . . . It's a holy synergy that can't be equaled by four or five adults. Interpersonal fellowship and accountability is vital but so is group.

As a group we can invent new ways to reach the cities of the world for Christ. As a group we can relieve each other of laborious weekly tasks. We have a broader view of the world. As a group we can pool our giving to be missional in a way we could never be as a handful.

So . . . got group? Since you're part of a Bible study, chances are great that "group" is already part of your life. Take a moment to ponder these questions together when you meet: Is your group open to newcomers? Do you know the talents of the group members? What's one thing you can contribute to your church that no one knows?

## Spills and Thrills

Hebrews 10:26-36

*26For if we deliberately sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27but a terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries. 28If anyone disregards Moses' law, he dies without mercy, based on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29How much worse punishment, do you think one will deserve who has trampled on the Son of God, regarded as profane the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace? 30For we know the One who has said, Vengeance belongs to Me, I will repay, and again, The Lord will judge His people. 31It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God! 32Remember the earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings. 33Sometimes you were publicly exposed to taunts and afflictions, and at other times you were companions of those who were treated that way. 34For you sympathized with the prisoners and accepted with joy the confiscation of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves have a better and enduring possession. 35So don't throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36For you need endurance, so that after you have done God's will, you may receive what was promised.*

Watch out for the spills!

The key of almost every TV biography (especially of rock-and-roll stars) is to follow a celebrity's rise to success, and then just after about the third commercial break, add a tease that contains language similar to, "Next, after all the success [fill in the celebrity's name] life began to spin wildly out of control." But it doesn't have to be that way. What kind of a husband would a man be if he said he loved his wife 51 weeks out of the year? Most wives I've known have demanded 52. Anything short is unacceptable. The same is true with our relationships with God. Our goal as believers should be the absolute surrender of me to the Lordship of Thee!

Why are some people so cynical toward Christians? Perhaps one of the greatest reasons is this: They see self-satisfied, stagnant, judgmental Christians getting by doing the bare minimum for God and expecting God to give them favor over unbelievers. Don't doubt it. This is important. God hates the faker of righteousness more than He does the outright sinner. Actions speak louder than words. Who does Jesus really go off on in the Bible, the unbelievers living in sin or the religious mainstream? Hands down, He goes off on the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the religious superstructures of the day. These were people who were living outwardly legal but inwardly despicable lives.

Remember the thrills!

I love the scene in *Jaws* where the old sailor Quint, police chief Brody, and the marine biologist Hooper are in the boat just before that last battle with the mythical shark. After supper, they begin comparing scars. Quint rolls up his sleeve and tries to top Hooper. The sheriff, who hates the sea, briefly considers showing off his appendix scar, but he realized that he was outdone. He never really experienced any sea wounds worth mentioning.

Like that scene, our glory as believers can be found in our willingness to hit the open seas and search for adventure, and our scars from the battle are our true glory. When I think of the saints who have gone before me—weathering cold, persecution, loss of wealth, and rejection—I can relate to Brody. I haven't really experienced the open seas of adventure offered in Christ's Great Commission.

The grandness of the Christian journey is to know and remember the hard fought victories. Seeing friends come to faith in Christ. Feeding hungry people. Changing the spiritual temperature in a situation. We are urged to remember. And isn't it amazing that we best remember the victories that cost us something, when we lay it all out on the table and go for broke, when we accomplish something that costs us. That's the true glory of life. There is no monument, no glory for the Christian who suffered no pain. It's in the equation. Our struggle, our battle scars, our brokenness for God is our glory.

The writer of Hebrews urges us: "Don't throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you need endurance, so that after you have done God's will, you may receive what was promised" (Hebrews 10:35-36). Remember, the real rewards will never be seen here on earth. They are stored away for the great, eternal celebration. Are you ready? What ways have you experienced suffering lately? How can you enter into the suffering of believers overseas and in areas of persecution?

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**August 31**

**Leave Everything on the Field!**

Hebrews 12:1-4

*1Therefore since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight*

*and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and run with endurance the race that lies before us, 2keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne. 3For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won't grow weary and lose heart. 4In struggling against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

Why is it so easy for us to pick up extra stuff when we all know we can't take anything with us? Time after time after time we hear stories, read sayings, and hear songs from Scripture that remind us that the real reward is not here. The rewards we see on earth are only figments of our imaginations. The Bible adds layer upon layer of supporting Scriptures that warn us to watch out for the mirages of this human existence.

We read of a man who stored up treasure on earth only to find out that his soul came due and he died before he could ever enjoy the fruits of his labor. We read of a rich man who is condemned to hell and a poor beggar who ate the scraps from his table, died, and gained the eternal banquet of heaven. We read Jesus saying, "Don't collect for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19).

The writer of Hebrews underscores this idea. He applies the metaphor of a race. He invites us to look up at grandstands that are really there although we can't actually see them. They are filled with sinful, ragamuffin saints who, despite their shortcomings and faults, left everything on the field of play. They held nothing back when their one moment of glory was given to them.

Saints with shortcomings? Oh yes. There's Samson, the world's greatest athlete who was defeated by a seductress but rose to glory in the final moments of his life. Rahab, a prostitute. Jephthah, the son of a prostitute. Abraham, a man of faith after doubting God's promise. Jacob, the schemer who wrestled with God. Moses, the stuttering voice speaking the words of Almighty God. They each found their seats in the grandstands. Why were these men and women mentioned? Perhaps, because we need to know that God's kingdom is built by babies in baskets, ex-cons, talking mules, weeping prophets, former prostitutes, and rejects. And so the message to people still wandering planet earth is simple, yet powerful. Don't hold anything back. Keep running! Get rid of sin! This is your day in the sun.

What sin is weighing you down today? What saint of old do you receive encouragement from?

### **What's Hardship Got to Do with It?**

Hebrews 12:5-11

*5And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons: My son, do not take the Lord's discipline lightly, or faint when you are reproved by Him; 6for the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and punishes every son whom He receives. 7Endure it as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there whom a father does not discipline? 8But if you are without discipline—which all receive—then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9Furthermore, we had natural fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn't we submit even more to the Father of spirits and live? 10For they disciplined us for a short time based on what seemed good to them, but He does it for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness. 11No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Perhaps you've heard the oldie, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" by Tina Turner. For most Christians the answer to that question is pretty straightforward: Love has everything to do with it. The question we ask with greater frequency is, "What's Pain Got to Do with It?" Most people are wired to avoid pain at all costs. We love pain relievers. We get insurance for everything so that we won't have to worry about hardship and pain. We are medicated, programmed, motivated, and bent toward pain avoidance.

In these few verses we're reading something we don't want to read. God is not our panacea for pain. He's in the business of changing us into His image, the image of Jesus. Our growth, our reward, and our maturity are borne in the crucible of suffering. So why does God allow cancer, prodigals, engine overhauls, financial hardship, and job loss? Because He is growing us up. He's treating us as legitimate sons and daughters. He's turning up the heat because He knows we need to grow.

Peterson's The Message paraphrase of Isaiah 1:5 illustrates God's frustration with undisciplined believers: "Why bother even trying to do anything with you when you just keep to your bullheaded ways? You keep beating your heads against brick walls. Everything within you protests against you. From the bottom of your feet to the top of your head, nothing's working right." I've often longed for a chair more than a chisel. God's pain grows us up and separates us from the self-saving mechanisms that are hardwired into our brains.

Remember the last and certainly the great beatitude of Christ: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me" (Matthew 5:11). Have you ever rejoiced when something terrible occurred? Worship God for being God even when He's not being God the way you'd like Him to be. (There's a first time for everything.)

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## **Keep On!**

Hebrews 12:12-15

*12Therefore strengthen your tired hands and weakened knees, 13and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but healed instead. 14Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness—without it no one will see the Lord. 15See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and by it, defiling many.*

What would the “large cloud of witnesses” mentioned in the opening verse of this chapter say to us? Certainly a part of their message would be found in these four verses. They tell us to take courage, strengthen our hands, walk straight, pursue peace, and watch out for the bitterness that could trip you on the path.

I don't think I've even been as tired as I was on a long hike I had obviously not prepped well enough to attempt. The Louisiana sun was blazing. I was in the middle of nowhere bringing up the rear with a bunch of teenagers, and I recognized the onset of premature old age. Every bone in my body hurt. And I knew the trail would wind through another mile of woods. I thought I was going to die. Early on in the daylong hike I thought I could keep up with them. Why not? I'm 26. Seven years ago I was a teen. The blisters, the breathing, the heat, and exhaustion were all indications that my teen years dissolved a long time ago.

But as I got closer to making it back to the camp I caught the aroma of grilled hamburgers. Ah yes, I may live to see the end of this. For the last few grueling minutes of the hike, I was motivated because I caught a whiff of things to come.

And in this race to the finish described in Hebrews 12, let's remember that there's a celebration feast on the other side of death. God will transport us into a realm that will make every blistered emotion, every hectic agenda, and every lonely path worth it. So turn your eyes to the prize. Stay on course and prepare for the celebration. It's going to be worth it.