

Lent 4 – Hebrews, chapter 12, verses 1 – 11 - Words of encouragement to the faithful :-

This reading begins again with that important word “*Therefore*” - because of all the examples given and all that is promised for us in chapter 11, what follows is the way we should respond! The grace that is ours and the salvation that is ours was only vaguely foreseen by the ‘saints’ of the Old Testament. Their faith is to be an encouragement to us who have so much for which to be thankful. See 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 10 – 12 (note that this short passage is also followed by a “*Therefore*” in verse 13)

Chapter 12, verses 1 – 4:- The opening picture is one of a great stadium with the terraces filled with spectators. They are witnesses watching us progress in the course of the life of faith. We are encouraged then to cast off anything which hinders us in the ‘race’. We are encouraged to “*lay aside every encumbrance*” - unnecessary baggage – if not, sadly, the end result may be the familiar words in Matthew, chapter 13, verse 22.

There is a graphic description here in Hebrews of “*the sin that so easily entangles*” - the word in the original is of a snare that springs from ambush to entrap us! It is relatively easy to begin our Christian life with enthusiasm. What counts is the long term dedication and the ‘*perseverance*’ needed for the long haul!

We are called to “*Look to Jesus*”. He is the author and finisher of our faith. Not only is he the supreme example available to us, he is also the “*perfecter*” of our faith – the one who has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us. Remember that in the Lord Jesus Christ we have a Saviour who has suffered trials and temptations during his incarnation. He knows what we face. He knows the struggle we have to lead righteous and holy lives. As an encouragement for your daily life read again Hebrews chapter 4, verses 14 – 16.

In ‘thinking over’ what the Lord Jesus endured on our behalf we need to recognise that we will meet with opposition. Again we are called to acknowledge that the enemy is using our vulnerability to sin to hinder us in our walk with the Lord. Remember Ephesians chapter 6, verse 12!

Chapter 12, verses 5 – 11:- Hard verses these and yet they reflect a constant theme throughout scripture! Especially Proverbs chapter 3, verses 11 – 12 which is quoted here. The temptation to sin is ever present in our earthly lives and so often we go wrong. If there is a deliberate turning away from the right path then there has to be some form of discipline. Children who are to be worthy of their Father may need to be ‘pulled up short’. The writer here encourages us to accept and endure this discipline as part of our training as ‘sons’ (verse 7). See also James chapter 1, verses 2 – 8.

The positive comes in verse 11. Yes, it is hard going through times of stress, disappointment, hardship and trouble – it is “*painful rather than pleasant*” or as another translation puts it “*at the time it seems to be a matter of grief rather than joy*”. However “*it later yields for those who have gone through it the peaceful fruit of righteousness*”.

Adversity and chastening then are a form of training in the Christian life.

As we approach Passion Sunday (26 March), Palm Sunday and Holy Week let us follow the Lord Jesus Christ as he ‘sets his face to go up to Jerusalem’, knowing the inevitability of what awaits him. In doing so we can in some way enter in to fellowship with him and prepare ourselves for Good Friday and the joy of Easter Day.

Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord.
Abide in Him always, and feed on His word;
Make friends of God’s children; help those who are weak;
Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.

Take time to be holy, the world rushes on.
Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.

William D. Longstaff (about 1882)