



How to remain faithful when the pathway becomes hard & difficult

Main Point

Are you feeling tired and weary over the frequent changes happening in our world? Have you felt despondent over what the world has become? Today's message is for you. Through the picture of story of Pilgrims Progress, we'll learn how easy it is for us to step away from the Way of the King into dangerous places where despair and despondency may take us captive.

Main Scripture:

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.
²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,
²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Introduction | Are you feeling tired and worn out?

I am sure I am not the only one here today who is feeling a bit tired and worn out over a long and arduous year.

As I sat down and prayed, I asked the Holy Spirit to give me a picture which would help me understand what I was feeling and assist me to know how to keep going.

The Spirit immediately reminded me of a scene from my favourite story, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

I'd like to read out a portion of Christian's journey, while the video is playing. I think, we'll discover, the scene relates remarkably well to both the Gospel passage and today's portion of the letter to the Hebrews.

After spending a week in the Valley of Peace, Christian and Hopeful had been travelling along the Way of the King all day. Late in the afternoon they came to a place where a stile led into a broad green meadow. It was called Bypass Meadow, and it belonged to a cruel and powerful giant named Despair. He was one of the most famous soldiers in the Wicked Prince's army, and he lived in a strong castle beyond the meadow, which could not be seen from the Way of the King. This was all written in Christian's book, but he did not think of looking at it just then.

The travellers were both feeling very tired. They found the path leading from the river rough and stony, and their feet were sore and aching.

Christian stopped when he saw the stile and leaped over it. A fence divided the meadow from the Way of the King, but a smooth grassy path ran close to it.

"Let's walk along this path for a little way" he said turning to Hopeful. "The stones are so hard, and my feet ache dreadfully."

"So do mine," answered Hopeful. "But would it be safe?"

"Oh, I think it must be," said Christian "See, it runs close to the fence. We could climb back again anyway in a minute."

Hopeful did not feel quite sure that they were doing right, but as he thought that Christian knew more about the King's laws than he did, he followed his companion into the meadow. The grass was soft and pleasant to their feet, and not far from them another man was walking along.

Christian called to him, saying, "Can you tell us where this path leads to?"

The man's name was Vain-Confidence. He turned and replied, "To the Celestial City."

"You see," said Christian, "I was right. We shall be quite safe. We can keep our eyes on this man, and then, if there is any danger, we shall know of it in time to escape."

But Hopeful was not satisfied, and when the night came on the shadows grew so thick that the figure of Vain-Confidence could no longer be seen.

Suddenly they heard a cry and a sound of falling. Hopeful clung to Christian's arm. And Christian too lost his courage.

They called to Vain-Confidence, but did not hear an answer.

"I'm sure we are not in the right way," said Hopeful, "and it is so dark."

Christian knew now that he had been foolish climbing over the stile.

But before he could say anything heavy drops of rain began to fall. Then a bright flash of lightning darted across the sky, and a roar of thunder followed. The thunder and lightning was more fearful than any which they had heard or seen before.

Christian began to cry. "Oh Hopeful, I am so sorry! You would have never climbed over the stile if I had not persuaded you."

"I might have," said Hopeful, "Don't cry, Christian. It was my fault too, because I didn't try to prevent you from climbing."

"Let us turn back," said Christian, "Perhaps we can find our way."

However, by this time the heavy rain had caused pools of water to gather in the meadow and the path by the fence was flooded. They soon found it was not possible to make their way back to the stile. Being so worn out with fright and weariness, before long they feel asleep.

The owner of the meadow, the Giant Despair, had heard the storm raging, and took a walk in his meadow. His eyes caught sight of the travellers and he was delighted to find they had entered into his domain.

After shaking them, the Giant took them to his home, called Doubting Castle". It would be weeks before Christian and Hopeful realised the key to their escape, lay within their grasp.

Point 1 | Jesus warned that the Way of the King would become arduous and many would be tempted to turn onto the easy way

When we compare this little picture story with our Gospel passage, we hear Jesus warning his disciples that times of great difficulty and testing were going to arise.

We too, often feel, God's way can become rocky and hard. In fact, being a traveller of God's kingdom, we understand that walking faithfully with Jesus will always demand significant energy –

it often feels like we are struggling to swim upstream when the current of the world is rapidly moving in the opposite direction.

Jesus warns us today, that persecution is to be an expected quality of the faith journey of the traveller. We will be misunderstood. We will be wrongly accused. We will be labelled offensive, judgemental and narrow-minded.

We will be asked to provide an explanation for why we speak and behave the way we do. Some will be called to stand and testify in human courts.

If this does happen, Jesus said, *"this will be your opportunity to tell them about me."* (Mark 13:9)

It is in fact the hard-going nature of the traveller's journey that causes them to notice an alternative path – a way which looked significantly more pleasurable and comfortable than the one they were on.

Their 'wandering eyes' saw 'greener pastures', representing the 'easy option' or a 'more comfortable route'.

Unfortunately, God's enemy knows how difficult the journey is, and so he builds 'stiles', or little steps that make the step away from the Way of the King much easier to explore.

At first, the alternative route seemed like it was not that different from the Way of the King. It looked like it was heading in the same direction.

So Christian and Hopeful began to rationalise: "Oh, it is all right. There is no danger here. We'll just head over here for a while, but not go too far. We'll keep God's way in our sights."

But inwardly both Christian and his companion knew that a step off God's straight path, was dangerous.

But, rather than consulting the King's Book, the Bible, they look to a fellow traveller – who just happens to have chosen the easier road.

Is not this human nature? When we *want* to go a particular way, we seek out others who hold similar ways of thinking, others who are already are walking the path we would prefer to walk.

But, let us not fail to notice – Hopeful was watching the choices made by Christian. When Christian decided to climb over the fence, off God's straight path, he encouraged his companion to join him.

Point 2 | Jesus warned that in the last days, many would try to deceive us into placing Vain-Confidence in our own reasoning, rather than the guidance of the Bible.

In today's passage Jesus warned, *"many will come and mislead you"* (Mark 13:5), they will urge you to follow them, rather than following God's right way.

The name of the traveller who was walking their own path is called 'Vain-Confidence'. He represents the person who trusts in human reasoning, who places their confidence in their own ability or cleverness to rationalise and choose a particular course of action.

I think Bunyan had Proverbs 3 in mind,

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6)

What is the fruit of trusting in our own reasoning?

Well, in the story, Christian and Hopeful hear him groaning.

What happened to him? Well, Jesus warned that when you follow a 'blind guide', both of you *"will fall into a ditch."* (Matthew 15:14).

There are many 'blind guides' in our world today, those who the Bible calls 'false teachers'. Jesus' apostles also warned us to be alert to false teachers, who behave like vicious wolves (Acts 20:29).

Paul said that they are *"eager to win your favour, but their intentions are not good. They are trying to shut you off from me so that you will pay attention only to them."* (Galatians 4:17)

How do we discern the vain-confidence of a false teacher?

Anyone who teaches or encourages what the Bible clearly does not condone and refuses to be accountable to the correction of the Christian faith community – is headed for destruction (2 Peter 2:1).

Point 3 | Every pilgrim needs a faith community. Firstly, to encourage each other to keep going when the going gets hard AND to warn each other the danger of stepping off the Way of the King.

Remember, what Christian and Hopeful said to each other after they realised their mistake.

Even as Christian acknowledged his foolishness in stepping off the Way of the King, Hopeful was quick to recognise his failure to prevent Christian from pursuing the dangerous way.

That is why we need each other!

Is this not what the writer of Hebrews reminds us?

"And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." (Hebrews 10: 25)

Do we take on the responsibility of reminding each other to remain faithful as we walk the Way of the King together?

When we see our companions faltering, or becoming tired or weak, do we quickly come to their side?

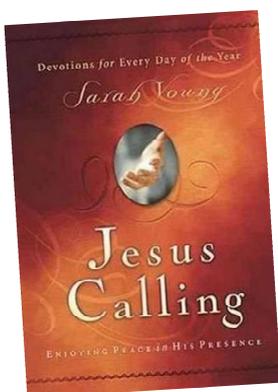
If we see our companions take a step off the straight and narrow, or are tempted to turn to 'greener pastures', do we remind them of the danger they may fall into?

In just a few verses later Jesus says, *"the one who stands firm to the end will be saved"* (Mark 13:13)

Certainly, those who endure, do so for they find their safety in travelling with the gathered community. They don't try to do it alone.

Rather, they meet together, *"thinking of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works."* (Hebrews 10:24)

And that is how we ensure we stand firm to the end.



A week from "Jesus Calling" by Sarah Young

This week, I have provided this week's pages from Sarah Young's devotional called "Jesus Calling". It so happens that Sarah Young's devotional focusses on the journey of the disciple of Christ.

I encourage you to order this devotional for yourself, as I believe it will greatly assist you to gain greater intimacy with our Saviour.

An Advent Devotional is in the process of being prepared and will be available from Sunday, 28th November, which is the first week of Advent.