

Lesson 7

Trailblazers

Introduction

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

Hebrews 12.1

Imagine this. You're hiking on a difficult path, your legs are burning, and your breath is short. It starts raining cold rain and you notice the path getting less and less maintained. You realize you're totally off the beaten path, and you're not sure the way back. This could get pretty frustrating, but then you notice some parts of the path that have clear signs of people that have gone before you. You see footprints in the mud. You see branches broken that were sticking out into this less-traveled path. You begin to see makeshift signs posted "This way to trailhead," pointing you the way back. Your heart begins to swell as you realize—someone else already went this way and they made it back. It's a lot easier to keep pressing on when you know that someone else was able to do it, too.

In the thick wilderness of life, it is sometimes maddening to try and clear the brush and make the way that leads back home all by ourselves. We hate to admit it sometimes, but we have to. It sure is a good thing that many people have gone on before us and blazed a trail by their good example of faithfulness to show us the way that leads to Heaven. Pioneers of faith have already gotten scraped up by the obstacles of life to teach us by their example what to do, and in many cases what not to do.

This truth emboldens us. This gives us strength. This gives us not just the knowledge of what we should do, but the strength of heart to press on and actually implement it. We are not alone. The way has been walked before. The good examples of faithful people of God are currently serving as trailblazing testimonies for our benefit, preserved in scripture, in history and in our own hearts and minds. Their stories are our stories—they are our trailblazers.

For discussion:

1. What difference does it make to know that you aren't the only one to ever deal with an issue?
2. What makes someone a spiritual trailblazer?
3. Who are the spiritual trailblazers that you know or have known?

Major Spiritual Pioneers in the Old Testament

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

1 Corinthians 10.11

The Old Testament is not to be neglected by New Testament Christians. Of course, many who grow up in the church learn a variance of Old Testament stories from a very young age. Other believers learn them from bible classes that detail the work of faithful men and women from the Old Testament age. These stories become near and dear to us. The Old Testament is not just a collection of interesting stories, though. The Old Testament is an anthology of wonderful works that shows trails blazed by the faithful in days before. It shows us countless examples of good decisions and even not-so-good decisions made by people of faith that we can learn from.

When we come across these Old Testament stories, we need to look carefully at the decisions they make. Not every call made by Old Testament examples are good, and each character has their own failings, but there are so many wonderful examples of people who went the right direction. We need to learn to ask “What can I learn from these examples?” “Why did God include this person’s story?” “What should I do that they did?” “What should I not do based on what they did wrong?”

Think about these powerful positive examples of faith and some of the lessons they brought:

- Abel, who despite having a brother who disdained him for his faithful service even enough to kill him, chose God and made earnest sacrifices. “He brought his best.” (Genesis 4.4)
- Noah and his family, who in the midst of an absolutely wicked culture not only lived faithfully, but invited others to get on board—literally. (2 Peter 2.5)
- Abraham and Sarah, who left everything to pursue a promise and a mission from God. (Genesis 12.1)
- Isaac and Jacob, who held the Abrahamic promise close to them until their deaths even through personal failings, outside threats and even familial conflicts. (Hebrews 11.20-21)
- Moses who grew up as an Egyptian noble, cast it all aside and led Israelite slaves out of the grip of a world superpower—not by his own power but by trusting in and following the command of the God of Heaven. (Exodus 15.22a)
- Joshua, who took the mantle of leadership from a dying Moses and continued to lead the people into the promised land. (Deuteronomy 31.1-8)
- King David and other faithful Kings, who made God the center of their lives when they had charge over a whole nation, (1 Sam 13.14)
- Samuel and other prophets who preached the truth to Israel, even when it wasn’t easy. (Hebrews 11.32)

Also consider some of the failures and wrong turns we saw from the Old Testament;

- Cain, who taken in jealousy for Abel struck him and killed him for being devoted to God. (Genesis 4.8)
- The wicked world that refused to hear Noah's preaching and went on in their sin. (Genesis 6.5)
- Abaraham's lying about his wife's identity in order to save face. (Genesis 12.11-13)
- Isaac doing the same thing that his father did in Genesis 12 again in Genesis 26. (Genesis 26.10)
- Jacob habitually lying and deceiving in large and small ways all through his life, namely to his own brother and father. (Genesis 25.29-34)
- Moses striking the rock out of anger for God at giving him the responsibility of leading the (grumbling) people to the promised land. (Genesis 20.11)
- Joshua blaming God for a military loss—when actually it was the result of sin in the camp by one of his own soldiers. (Joshua 7.7)
- King David, and other kings of Israel, followers of the one true God or not were all imperfect men. Some more than others. Even the greatest of all of them, King David committed horrible sin by taking his friend's wife and inevitably killing him. (2 Samuel 12.13)
- People in the Old Testament who not only rejected but persecuted the prophets for preaching the truth. (Matthew 5.12)

For discussion:

1. Who is your favorite Old Testament character/story?
2. What can we learn from some of these stories in the Old Testament? Why do we have their examples?

The Trailblazer

...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12.2

We have a host of imperfect examples all through the Old Testament that bring us plenty to learn. Now though, we look to Jesus as the forger of the straightest path to Heaven. He never veered, never tottered. He not only wrote the map, he also followed it perfectly. Jesus wasn't just a trailblazer, he was THE trailblazer. We have discussed this at length in previous lessons. We see now the result of the completion of Jesus' mission—we have a perfect example to follow when it comes to our spiritual journey.

Think about the lay of the land in the world when Jesus arrived and began forging his path for us to walk. The conditions were not ideal from a human perspective. The Roman Empire was extremely powerful and brutal, crucifying and imprisoning enemy after enemy. The people of God had become weak and paralyzed by traditionalism and the cultural pressures of being under the Roman boot. Yet, Jesus chose this time to come to blaze the trail for all of us. He came and called so many others to his side to be a part of that trailblazing effort.

For discussion:

1. How did Jesus blaze a trail for us? What does his example mean?
2. Why did Jesus come at the time and place that he did?

Acts of the Apostles... and Many Others

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Acts 2.41

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Acts 8.4

But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Acts 12.24

After Jesus finished his journey on earth, he left his message with twelve apostles and many other witnesses. He had poured into these men and entrusted them to carry on with the trailblazing. After the resurrection of Jesus, they took this charge and absolutely ran with it. In the Acts of the Apostles, we have constant examples of this commitment and purpose continuing on. The entire back half of the New Testament shows exactly how the people who put their faith in Jesus responded to extreme persecution from Roman political and cultural leaders and Jewish religious elites alike. They went on making more disciples and helping other people get to Heaven.

The Apostles and the other disciples were being constantly pressed on all sides by persecution, but they did not break. They continued teaching in secret, house-to-house and in synagogues. The message of the gospel even converted one of those persecutors, Saul of Tarsus who eventually became a leader of the church starting in Acts 9. We can also read how the New Testament church converted Roman officials like Cornelius in Acts 10.

As a result of a chain of teaching that reaches all the way back into the flourishing first century church, Christians today are still blazing a trail for other believers. We have all seen examples of

faithful believers who came before us and inspire our faith every day by devoting their lives to Christ, sacrificing earnestly for his cause.

For discussion:

1. What is the trail blazed ahead of us by the early New Testament church? What can we learn from their example?
2. What are some other examples outside the New Testament we can learn from of people of faith? (Perhaps someone you know personally.)

You are a Trailblazer

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light

1 Peter 2.9

You reader, are a trailblazer as well. Every step that you take and every obstacle you overcome evidences to another individual that they can do the same. The path that you walk leaves an example. Even at this moment, as you go through this bible study material you are blazing a trail from the path you are walking. We can't lose the significance of this. We may never know who is watching, and how closely they are watching. So, what sort of trail are you blazing right now?

My Way

For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ...

Philippians 2.21

If my life's path is a long series of decisions that lead to my pleasure, I may be missing something. If my life's path is a result of my own stubbornness and a refusal to admit I'm wrong, I may be missing something. If it's always my way or the highway, eventually I'll end up making the wrong call. Once I've made a habit of never admitting when I take a wrong turn, it'll be really hard to do that when it matters the most.

What sort of trail does that blaze for everyone else? Well, other folks might assume the same thing. If I get lost, I should just refuse to admit it too. I should pretend that I have it all figured out too. I should never ask for help, because look at so-and-so, they seem to have it all figured out! (Meanwhile, so-and-so is in a secret ditch, and has been for years.)

Everyone Else's Way

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 1.10

Sure, it's not a bad thing to lean on other people or ask for help, but if other people are the ones directing our path, we'll never find the way back home. If we are basing our journey off of what everyone else thinks, then we'll never get our feet under us. Why? We're all equally hapless. We all get lost spiritually! We all choose the wrong "why" and lose the right "why" at some point. (We established that back in lesson 3.) We all struggle on this path. Only God knows the narrow way that we are supposed to walk. What example will I leave for others if all I do is follow the crowd then?

Meandering

So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

Revelation 3.16

It is true that we will all get off track at one point or another. We all fall short of God's standard. We all get lost sometimes. There is a difference though between a purposeful march up the road to Heaven and a meandering effort, which is almost indistinguishable from being lost. How do I know if I am meandering?

A meandering path is one who sometimes half-heartedly chooses God. A meandering spiritual life has God as an accessory feature rather than a core unit. God is reduced to "church." God is reduced to slogans. God is a feature of life for the meandering person, not the ultimate motivation and destination. A meandering path can be even more confusing than a totally lost one. If the trail we blaze is meandering—a lukewarm faith—then might it be that those who later walk in our footsteps may be terribly confused?

Discipleship

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Matthew 16.24

The path of a disciple is the trail that Jesus calls us to blaze. Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and make our entire lives about the God of Heaven. This is not just a religious pursuit, it is a deeply spiritual pursuit. The path of a disciple springs forth from a sincere but imperfect devotion to Jesus' Path.

When we pursue this path, we learn how to be honest with others, with ourselves and with God. We learn how to love others, we learn how to love ourselves and we learn how to love God. We learn how to have mercy. We learn what's right and how to stand for it. When we follow Jesus, we invite him to the table for every family meal. When we follow Jesus, we invite others to follow him too.

For discussion:

1. Why is a good example so powerful?
2. What is the path that we're called to and what are some ways that we can devote ourselves more to the path that Jesus calls us onto?

Prayer for today—Lord, thank you for the trails that were blazed ahead. Please help me to see the trails blazed ahead of us and keep pressing on the same sort of path. Help me to make the way straight for you in my life. Help all of us to do that.