

“Blazing the Trail”

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¹Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” ⁶So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

⁹Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings... ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵Through [Christ], then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.
(Hebrews 13:1-9a,14-16)

In my younger days I spent a lot of time on the Appalachian Trail. Sometimes with large groups of Scouts, sometimes with just a few friends or family members, I’ve hiked long sections of the trail in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. So I am very familiar with the 6-inch blazes of white paint that guide hikers along all 2,198 miles of the trail, from Springer Mountain in Georgia all the way up to Mount Katahdin in Maine.

It is estimated that there are approximately 165,000 white blazes on the A.T. That may seem like a lot, but they are necessary. Even though much of the trail is well-worn and easy to follow, there are times when it is difficult to know the right direction for your next step. You might come to an intersection of multiple trails. At other times, the path runs across rocky terrain as it scrambles over a mountain top. In the fall, leaves might cover over the path. And then there are the many creek and river crossings, when the trail disappears beneath running water. That is why, in the 1930’s, it was decided that the entire trail should be marked with blazes of white paint. These trail markers, thickly painted on durable surfaces like rocks, fence posts, and healthy trees, were cost-effective, simple to install, and easily spotted from a distance. The intent is that a hiker, as they pass by one white blaze, should already be able to see the next one ahead.

This same strategy for staying on the right path is written into the final chapter of the book of Hebrews. Indeed, the entire letter is written to early church communities who were in danger of turning aside... drifting away from the straight and narrow path... or even abandoning the Christian Way altogether.¹ After spending the first twelve chapters reminding the churches of the power brought near in Christ and encouraging them to remain committed to their journeys of faith, the writer gives them, in the final chapter, a map for the road ahead. More specifically, they listed eight key markers – eight things that everyone can do -- to help them feel confident that they are going

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. 3.



the right way.² In a sense, the writer gave us eight white blazes... eight signposts for faithfulness. If we can keep watch for these signs, the letter says, if we can seek them in our daily living, then our feet will remain firmly and safely on the path that leads to God.

So what are these blazes that show us the way?

1. The first is simple: ***“Let mutual love continue.”*** Simple to say, much harder to do, especially in situations where we feel abused or wronged or disrespected. As I said before, the letter to the Hebrews was written to churches that were having some trouble. Relationships were under strain, and the bonds of mutual love – the blessed ties that had held them together – were unraveling. It’s a simple reminder: in the life of faith, we always need to be walking toward love.

2. The second marker reminded us that we are not just to love those close to us: ***“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.”*** The Old Testament law that aliens and foreigners in your midst were to be shown hospitality was one that was faithfully and dutifully embraced by early Christian churches. Do not fail to give strangers respect, the letter says. Do not neglect their needs. For the people who come to your door are always people of God... and, who knows... they might turn out to be angels. So, do not shirk from these obligations. Lean into them, and you will stay on the path.

3. The third blaze along the trail of faithful living is that we are called to **stand with those who are being oppressed**, and come to the aid of people in times of trial. Remembering people in prison certainly includes people who are actually incarcerated, but it goes much further than that. Prisons do not have to be made of bricks and bars; they can be mental, emotional, relational, economic, political. Consider how you would feel, the letter says, if you were in prison... if you were being tortured. What kind of help would you cry out for? What kind of advocate would you need? Figure that out... and then be that help. Be that advocate. That is the way of Christ.

4. The fourth blaze deals with the **purity of our personal relationships**. *“Let marriage be held in honor by all,”* the letter says. And while not all of us are married, all of us are called to be faithful in our relationships, to treat one another with honor and respect.

5. The next blaze we need to look out for is a big one for us: ***“Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.”*** It is one of the most repeated warnings of the New Testament. If we measure our value in money or possessions... if we rate ourselves or other people in terms of money or possessions... if making money and having possessions is our primary motivator... then we have left the path. The problem is not having the money; the problem is that we convince ourselves that the money will save us, or protect us, or make us happy. Don’t think that way, the letter warns. Remember that God has promised never to *“leave you or forsake you.”* So do not be afraid. Trust God to provide what you need. Align yourself with that truth, and you will stay on the right path.

6. This is one of my favorites: **remember your teachers and mentors in the faith**. Hold fast to who you are by holding fast to those who helped you to discover and understand who you really are. We all have people in our lives who showed us what we want to be simply by being the people God made them to be. They stand out in our memories as people who were particularly kind... particularly generous... particularly gentle, faithful, helpful, or brave. When you feel lost, remember those people, the letter says, and try to imitate the good things you saw in them. Even in your memory, they can show you the way.

7. Here is another thing that is easy to say but often difficult to do: ***“Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.”*** This, too, is a warning repeated in scripture. False prophets do exist in the world. Wolves dressed up in sheep’s clothing will try to sell us a bill of goods. Leaders

² Bryan J. Whitfield, “Commentary on Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-3/commentary-on-hebrews-131-8-15-16>.

with selfish or malicious intent can lead us astray and pull us off the faithful path, so we must be discerning about ideas or decisions that purport to be wise or benevolent, because many are not. As one of my mentors in the faith, Frances Taylor Gench, has written: “In our day, we too must discern whether new teachings that blow our way are faithful witnesses to... the sure and unchanging word [of] God.”³

8. Last but not least is a blaze that holds all of these together: “*continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God.*” This basically boils down to **being faithful in our worship**. Give God praise regularly. Pray regularly. Gather with your brothers and sisters regularly. Serve side by side with them regularly. Share your gifts with generosity on a regular basis. As the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 10: “*Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.*”

Strung together, these eight markers, faithfully followed, will help keep us on the right trail. Just as the conservationists who originally envisioned, laid out, and cleared the Appalachian Trail wanted to help future hikers know the way, the writer of the book of Hebrews knew that future Christians trying to walk in the ways of Christ could lose their way. If the true and faithful path was not marked clearly, people would get lost. So they did their best to give them some trail signs, trusting that the rest would be up to them, and up to God.

I distinctly remember a time when I was backpacking a section of the Appalachian Trail with my Scout troop. At some point, our Scoutmaster called for us all to stop. He pointed up ahead at a tree along the trail. There was a blaze on it, but it was painted blue. Not white. We were supposed to be on the Appalachian Trail all day, but at some point we had obviously made a wrong turn. And we all took it together.

“When was the last time someone remembers seeing a white blaze?” my Scoutmaster asked. We racked our brains. We remembered seeing them, but they all kind of blended together. Really, there was only one thing to do. We turned around and began to backtrack. I remember it took us a while to get back to a white blaze and find the path we had meant to take. Fortunately, in the end, it was just a detour. We were a little late getting there, but we made it home.

We can do the same thing as children of God. When we feel lost, when we realize we have gone astray -- as individuals or as a group -- we can ask “When is the last time we saw one of these signs?” Maybe we will remember a time when a mentor helped us find the way. Maybe we will recall a time when we sat with someone in a time of crisis, helping them to navigate a difficult situation or bear a heavy burden. Maybe we went out of our way to come to the aid of a stranger, and they turned out to be an angel we never would have met if we had closed the door or just kept on walking by. If we can backtrack our way to these markers of clarity and purpose and goodwill -- moments when we feel like God is close to us and we are close to God -- we can take our bearings, reorient, and regroup. These markers help us see clearly where we are, and who we are... blazes along the faithful trail to health, happiness, and holiness.

Amen.

³ Gench, p. 75.