

## **HANDHOLDS FOR THE WAY – Pt 1 (Hebrews 13:1-8    March 5, 2006)**

One of the most dangerous sports in the world is free climbing.



In this sport – you climb sheer cliffs using only your hands and feet with no climbing aids like crampons and pitons.



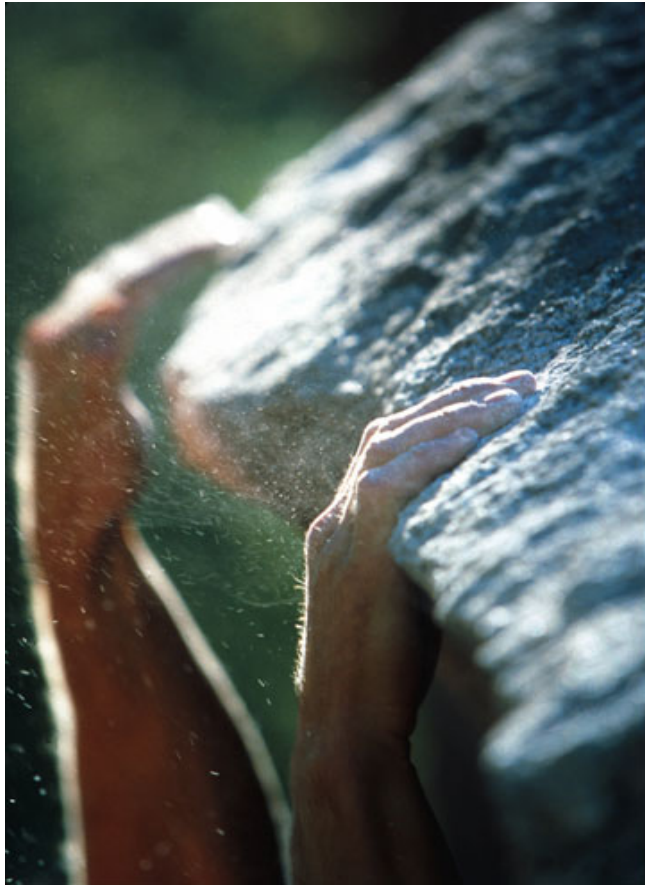
Imagine standing at the base of a sheer face like El Capitan and looking up.



If you are going to make it to the top:

What are you going to need? You know that all the way up you have to find footholds:

And handholds that will stop you falling and keep you moving upwards.



If you find the handholds and footholds – and you add a dash of perseverance – you will make it to the end.

In chapter 12 of the book of Hebrews – the author described the Christian life like coming to Mount Zion to the heavenly Jerusalem.

In chapter 13 – what he does is provide some of the handholds and footholds that enable us to persevere until we get to the city of the living God – to get through the trials of this life – to make it to the end.

He knows this life is tough – but he longs for every one of his sheep to make it to the end.

If you think back to last week, he finished chapter 12 with these words – Hebrews 12:28-29:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so **worship God acceptably with reverence and awe**, for our “God is a consuming fire.”



Hebrews 12:28-29:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so **worship God acceptably with reverence and awe**, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

It is unfortunate that our English translations don't show this well, but if you look at chapter 12 verse 28 – the word that is usually translated **acceptably** is the same word as found in chapter 13 verses 16 and 21 where it is translated **pleased** or **pleasing**.



Hebrews 12:28:

So worship God **pleasingly** with reverence and awe.

Hebrews 13:16:

With such sacrifices God is **pleased**.

Hebrews 13:21:

May He work in us what is **pleasing** to Him.

What we are to grasp is that in chapter 13, the author is telling us *how* we can **worship God acceptably with reverence and awe**. How we can live a life that is **pleasing** to God.

What he does in chapter 13 is that he is laying out *the handholds along the way*. The aids that we have in this life to help us persevere to the end – to live a life that is pleasing to God.

This week I read over and over this chapter. It became very clear to me that these were the words of a pastor. A man who cared deeply for his sheep.

We don't know the name of the man who wrote Hebrews. We aren't sure who it was written to.

But when you read through this chapter – you find a man longing for every sheep – every saint – all his beloved flock to make it to the heavenly Jerusalem.

It seems that the author of Hebrews had been one of the early leaders in the church this letter was written to – but now he is ministering elsewhere.

Perhaps he has oversight of a number of churches. Perhaps he is a church planter and has moved on.

But like any true shepherd – the men and women of this church are never far from his heart.

These are the words of a pastor to his flock.

We have seen throughout this book that they are struggling. Some had taken their eyes from Christ and toyed with returning to the comfort of Judaism.

To do this spells eternal disaster. Hebrews 10:29-31:

How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ... It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The author of Hebrews is dead set blunt. Take your eyes of Jesus and you will stand before God – alone – and He will consume you.

Nothing else – no animal sacrifices – no Law – nothing will save you on that day except Jesus.

Throughout this whole epistle he is pleading with these men and women to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus – the author and perfecter of their faith.

Now in chapter 13 – he gives his closing exhortations.

He wants to see every one of them in glory. So he pleads with them to use all of the divine aids we have to keep our eyes on Jesus and to keep moving towards the celestial city.

The more I read this chapter – then more I thought of each and every one of you.

I can tell you that the elders of this church take very seriously our responsibility to shepherd you – the flock of God in our care. We care deeply for the souls of each of you.

We long to see you worship God with a reverence and awe that is pleasing to Jesus. We long to see every one of persevere to the end.

But the longer I have been a pastor and an elder – the more I realise something – there is only so much we can do.

We can point people to Jesus. We can urge them to find satisfaction in Him. We can plead with them to live holy lives. We can beg them to get serious about their faith. We can hold them accountable. We can put their hands in the handholds on the way.

But, in the final analysis – unless you fix your eyes on Jesus – unless you plead for the grace of God – unless you beg for Jesus to perfect your faith – there is nothing we can do.

This week, I thought about some of those who have called this church their spiritual home.

Some are now apostates – they have rejected the faith – and are living miserable lives.

Others have turned from the holiness of God to wallow in sin – at least one person is in prison for his sin.

Many who I have seen come and go – I could not honestly tell you if the grace of God is in their hearts at all. I don't know if I will see them in glory. I don't know if they are persevering to the end.

I lie awake some nights wondering what more I could have done for these men and women.

And even more do I lie awake at times wondering about each of you – praying for you – asking for God's grace to bless you.

On Sundays – I stand up here and look out. I see a group that looks ready for heaven.

But I know the Sunday veneer is not the real you. Some of you are struggling. And I have no problem telling you – I struggle too.

What we have seen is that the only answer is to fix our eyes on Jesus – to cling to Him. But to help us fix our eyes on Him – to help us live lives pleasing to God – the Lord in His grace gave us some wonderful aids to help us persevere in our march towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

They are found here in chapter 13. We will cover the first four today and finish this chapter next week.

The first handhold along the way is: **The support of our fellow Christians.**



- **The support of our fellow Christians**



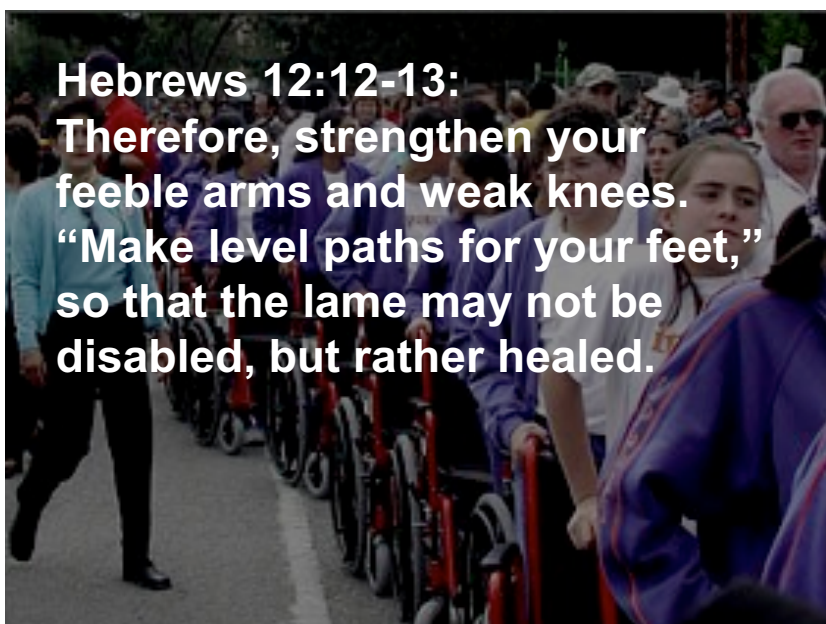
Hebrews 13:1-3:

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

The road to the heavenly Jerusalem is filled with saints. None of these saints are healthy.

Hebrews 12:12-13:

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.



But these disabled saints are limping on together – helping others – pointing others to Jesus.

The church is one of the great aids we have to keep us moving towards glory.

*Keep on loving each other as brothers.*

I have had some tough times in the twenty-two years I have been a Christian. And it has been my brothers and sisters in Christ who have been there to help me through.

When I have sinned – they have chastised me.

When I fell – they picked me up.

When I struggled – they encouraged me.

We don't walk the road to the Celestial City alone. We walk it in the company of the saints.

One of the ways Jesus aids us is through the gift of brothers and sisters.

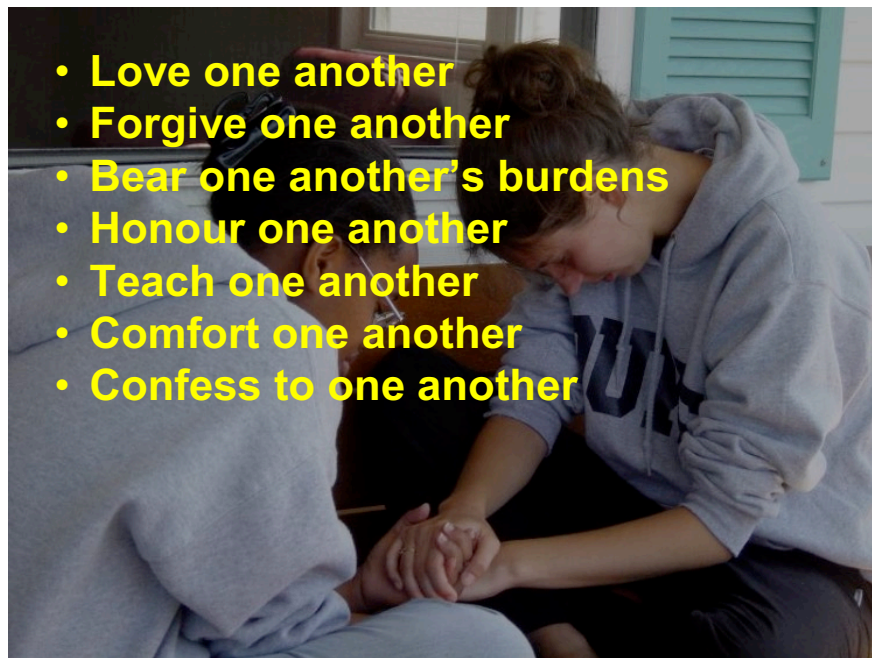
Martin Lloyd-Jones talks about his battles with depression – and it is fellow saints who come to pray and to read the Scriptures and to remind him of the glory of Christ and restore his soul.

We all have those times when we need the love and support of the saints.

That is why Scripture is filled with more than 90 references that contain the phrase "one another." And all of these can basically be reduced to seven groupings:

- Love one another
- Forgive one another
- Bear one another's burdens
- Honour one another
- Teach one another
- Comfort one another
- Confess to one another





It isn't easy at times to love other Christians.

We are selfish. We don't live as we ought. We make mistakes.

But the very fact we aren't perfect shows how much we need each other to point the way to Jesus the perfecter of our faith.

We are all pilgrims on the way. When I fall – you pick me up. When you stumble – I will help you. When I take my eyes off Jesus – you point me to the cross.

You are one of my greatest assets in this world on the path to glory. I need you. We need each other.

Being part of the body of Christ doesn't just mean we meet on Sundays. It means we are involved through the week with each other. We know when you need help. We are there to bear each others burdens. We are there when we are needed.

I need you to love me in spite of my sin. Help me where I am weak. Prod me. Exhort me. Remind me. Be there for me.

*Do not forget to entertain strangers.*

It is not just Christians we know well who we are to aid – but strangers. Christ unites us all and there are times when we will need the help of the body of Christ from those we don't even know.

In the first century – there were no hotel chains. There were only inns – and these were places filled with promiscuity and danger.

So Christians who arrived in a city were entertained by members of the local church.

This protected the saint from temptation and worldliness.

This open door policy among Christians made a huge impact on non-Christians. Again and again in the writings of the time we read about how the non-Christians looked on in amazement as Christians opened their homes and lives to strangers.

The need to open our homes to Christian merchants and travellers because the inns are places of disrepute has passed.

But, the principle that we are so united in Christ that when we meet a Christian for the first time – we are united – closer than blood – by the bond of Christ – still applies.

Last week we said goodbye to the Selfridges. They have a tough life – travelling all around the world. A little over a year ago they arrived as strangers. Last week they left as family. The bonds of Christ unite us.

I think of the Birds and the Hemphills and Ken and others. When they leave here – I am so thankful for the saints in the places they are ministering who will be there to help them.

Christians are one in Christ. We have to be there to help each other on the way. But this is an area we can fall down in.

It is so easy for a church to become hermetically sealed. We become comfortable with each other. This can mean that when other Christians come into the fellowship they aren't warmly welcomed. What a tragedy.

I still remember a conversation I had as a young Christian. Soon after I came to Christ, I went around to many of my friends in medicine sharing with them.

One friend told me what had happened to him. Four years earlier – certain circumstances in his life drove him to start going to a local church. He said he went five Sundays in a row – and no one – not one person ever said hello.

He swore there and then to never return to church again. He wasn't a Christian – but what if he was a struggling saint in need of help on the way?

Every saint throughout this world is our brother or sister. If they need help – we give it. If we need help – they give it.

This is one of the blessings of life – and one of the aids to help us on our way.

And who knows – *perhaps we will entertain angels without knowing it.*

Abraham shows hospitality to three men – they turned out to be two angels and the Lord Himself.

*Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

In the time this book was written, the persecution of Christians throughout the empire was becoming worse. These Christians had suffered. Hebrews 10:32-34:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

Prison in the first century was not the comfortable, sanitary place it is today. It was brutal.

You end up in prison simply because you love Jesus and the pressure comes – turn from Jesus and freedom is yours. It is hard to stay the course.

One of the ways to make it through is the prayers, the support, the encouragement of the saints.

The church brought meals and looked after the families. The church encouraged them to look for the heavenly city.

We don't have the same situation in Australia. But I get the *Voice of the Martyrs* and *Barnabas Fund* magazines. Throughout this world – our brothers and sisters are imprisoned, tortured and persecuted. And in those lands it is the church who comes to aid them in their plight.

When the grace of God touched our hearts and made us one in Christ – then we became brothers and sisters. We can't turn to the world for help – but we should always be able to turn to each other for help.

There are times when I wish we did have more overt persecution here – it would sort the wheat from the chaff – it would help us focus on eternity – it would make us rely on Christ and each other.

But, as it is – we all have tough times – the rough week at work, the illness, the family disaster – times when we need prayer, support, encouragement to keep going.

Times when it is hard for us to see the glory of Jesus and the wonder of heaven. Then we need our brothers and sisters to bear our burdens and help us on the way.

I think that it is a tragedy in our modern world that we don't cherish the fellowship we have in Jesus. Our cities are bigger, our time is pressed, our week is compartmentalised. We tend to focus so much of our efforts on the nuclear family.

But one of the great blessings to aid us on the way is the saints.

And as well as – **The support of our fellow Christians.**

The second handhold along the way is – **The support of our spouse.**

Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.



- **The support of our fellow Christians**
- **The support of our spouse**

Where would I be without my wife? I could barely imagine.

Sometimes Dena is out later than I expect – and suddenly I have this thought – what if God has taken her home? Then I think – how will I cope?

God gave us husbands and wives as our closest human support – our most intimate relationship in this life.

Don't get me wrong here. If you are single I want you to know that many men and women have been greatly used of God who never married – or who lost a spouse and never remarried. Jesus and Paul are prime examples. Amy Carmichael is a wonderful modern day example.

In fact Paul says – if you don't have the care of a family you can do more for the kingdom. He puts his thoughts on singleness very plainly in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35:

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

If you are unmarried you have the time and flexibility to be undivided in your devotion to the Lord. And He will aid you in your walk and honour your devotion. Friendships in the body other than a spouse become your greatest aid.

But, for those who do marry – he who finds a godly wife finds a good thing.

If the Lord does bless you with a husband or wife – then understand that they are the greatest earthly aid to help you on your way.

Our spouses pray for us, encourage us, love us to the end of life.

No one in this world will live you like your husband or wife. They know your weaknesses and struggles and they love you anyway.

They are your greatest gift in this life.

My dear wife knows my moods, my idiosyncrasies. She puts up with me. She admonishes me. She encourages me. She points me to Jesus. She reminds me of the sweetness of life in Christ. I don't know where I would be without her.

But men and women. We can tarnish that bond. Sleep around. Commit adultery. Ignore your marriage. Prove your self unfaithful and you will lose that trust.

You will probably still be together but it takes years and years for that trust to be restored. You won't have that synergy and bond that aids you on the way.

So cherish that relationship. Preserve it at all costs. Do whatever it takes to keep your relationship pure and vibrant.

Martin Luther was blessed with a wonderful wife in Katherina von Bora. He could not have been the man he was without Katie.

Listen to what Luther wrote of his marriage:

I would not surrender my Katie for France and Venice together.

To have peace and love in marriage is a gift which is next to the knowledge of the Gospel.

Of course the Christian should love his wife. ... She should be his deepest love. And she should also be his dearest friend.

This life has nothing more lovely and delightful than a woman who loves her husband.

Nothing is more sweet than harmony in marriage, and nothing more distressing than dissension.

Let the wife make her husband glad to come home and let him make her sorry to see him leave.

If, in a marriage, the husband shows no forbearance toward his wife and the wife none toward her husband, then the married state will soon become a tyranny, and everything will be ruined.

Luther would not have been the man he was if Katie was not the wife she was. She was God's gift to help Luther through some of the most trying times in Christian history.

But if he had betrayed the trust of his wife – if he had dishonoured the marriage bed – then who knows how Christian history would read today.

Do whatever it takes to preserve the love and trust of your marriage. It is God's great gift to pilgrims to help them on their way.

So – the handholds along the way, we have so far have been:

**The support of our fellow Christians.**

**The support of our spouse.**

The third handhold along the way is – **The support of contentment.**



- **The support of our fellow Christians**
- **The support of our spouse**
- **The support of contentment**

Hebrews 13:5-6:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

When we are content in Christ – then our eyes do not leave the One who satisfies us.

But if we look to the world – to money and the things it gives to satisfy – then our eyes leave Jesus.



The love of money represents all that money can buy – wealth, power and worldly security.

But God says – trust Me – not wealth. Be content with Me – don't long for more.

The love of money is one area in which our eyes can so easily stray from Jesus.

We can look for contentment in things – when only Jesus truly satisfies.

Jesus came with no armies, no wealth, no where to lie His head – and He cried – take up your cross and follow Me.

To follow Him, you have to believe that God will never leave you and never will I forsake you. You have to trust that the Lord is your helper, so what can men do to me? You have to know that belonging to Jesus is better than anything this world could ever provide.

But as well as looking for satisfaction in money – wealth and power become substitutes for trusting God.

When Hezekiah was King – Sennacherib, the king of Assyria sent a huge army to Jerusalem.

His commander cried out to the people of God:

On what are you basing this confidence of yours? It can't be strategy and military strength. And don't say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God" Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'

This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?

Sennacherib was saying to find satisfaction in him – in his wealth in the things he can provide – tangible worldly things.

But those who fix their eyes on Jesus turn to Him. King Hezekiah prayed to the LORD:

O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ... Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God.

And God did not desert His people. He slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers during the night and the army fled.

Are we content in God or do we look to the world to calm our anxiety?

Do we work night and day to build up our assets in case of some as yet unforeseen disaster? Or do we seek first His kingdom and live for the glory of the world to come?

You cannot serve two masters – you cannot serve God and money.

In Philippians 4:19 Paul tells us:

My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

Do we believe it or not?

1 Timothy 6:6 tell us:

Godliness with contentment is great gain.

Trusting Him to meet our needs and satisfy our soul is gain.

But if we take our eyes off Jesus – our hands and feet will slip.

We have seen the first three handholds along the way:

**The support of our fellow Christians.**

**The support of our spouse.**

**The support of contentment.**

The fourth handhold along the way is – **The support of saintly examples.**

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- The support of our fellow Christians
  - The support of our spouse
  - The support of contentment
  - The support of saintly examples

Hebrews 13:7-8:

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

The fact that they are urged to remember these particular leaders indicates that these saints had died.

They may have been martyred. They may have simply died. But the point is that they **finished** the race. They reached the celestial city. They persevered to the end.

These were men and women who shared the gospel with this church. Told them about the glory of Jesus Christ. Now they have gone to be with the Lord they loved.

They lived the gospel they preached.

And the author of Hebrews urges his flock to consider the outcome of the way of life of these former saints – to see that they were faithful to the end – and so to imitate their faith.

How were they able to make it to the end? What was their handhold or foothold that allowed them to navigate the trials of this life?

Quite simply – they fixed their eyes on Jesus. They trusted Him.

Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

The point is this – Jesus enabled these saints of yesterday to persevere to the end. He will enable the saints of today to persevere to the end. He will enable the saints of tomorrow – the line saints that only ends with His return – to persevere to the end.

The saints of chapter 11 did it tough – but Jesus enabled them to persevere to the end.

The saints of the early church did it tough – but Jesus enabled them to persevere to the end.

I doubt you and I will do it as tough – but we still have trials, temptations, diversions – but the same Jesus will enable us to persevere to the end.

It was Jesus who enabled Noah and Moses and David to stand firm to the end.

It was Jesus who enabled Paul to stand firm to the end.

It was Jesus who enabled Luther to stand firm to the end.

It is Jesus who will enable you and I to stand firm to the end.

The funerals of saints are times of sadness and happiness. Sadness that they have left our lives – happiness that they persevered to the end and have their reward.

You and I have seen men and women – ordinary saints like us – men and women with problems and difficulties – but by the power of Jesus – they persevered to the end. So can we.

I love the testimony of the saints.

I love reading Scripture to see the power of God at work. In Noah as he built the ark. In Abraham as he walked up Mount Moriah with Isaac. In Elijah as he faced the prophets of Baal. In Paul as he turned from Saul the persecutor to Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles.

I love the fact that the power of God kept these men – flawed, human, fallible – yet by God's grace they persevered to the end.

I love biographies. Ordinary men and women who God uses to do great things.

Law students who turn continents upside down. Bank clerks who take the gospel to China. Cricketers who revolutionise Africa with the Word.

But men and women who are faithful to the end.

Jesus who worked in them is at work in me. He perfected their faith – He will perfect my faith.

Look – I know how tough the Christian life can be. I know how distracting life can be. I know the lure of sin.

But Jesus is there. And to aid us on the way – He gave us:

**The support of our fellow Christians.**

**The support of our spouse.**

**The support of contentment.**

**The support of saintly examples.**

Use these helps. Use them to fix your eyes on Jesus. Walk worthy of Him who called you. Worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

The picture I have of this passage is us making our way toward the celestial city. We are lame and crippled. The going is tough.

But helping us, urging us on – are the saints of this church, our spouses, the saints who have gone before and before us is Jesus calling us home.

And together we **will** stay on the path to Zion and claim the crown that awaits us.