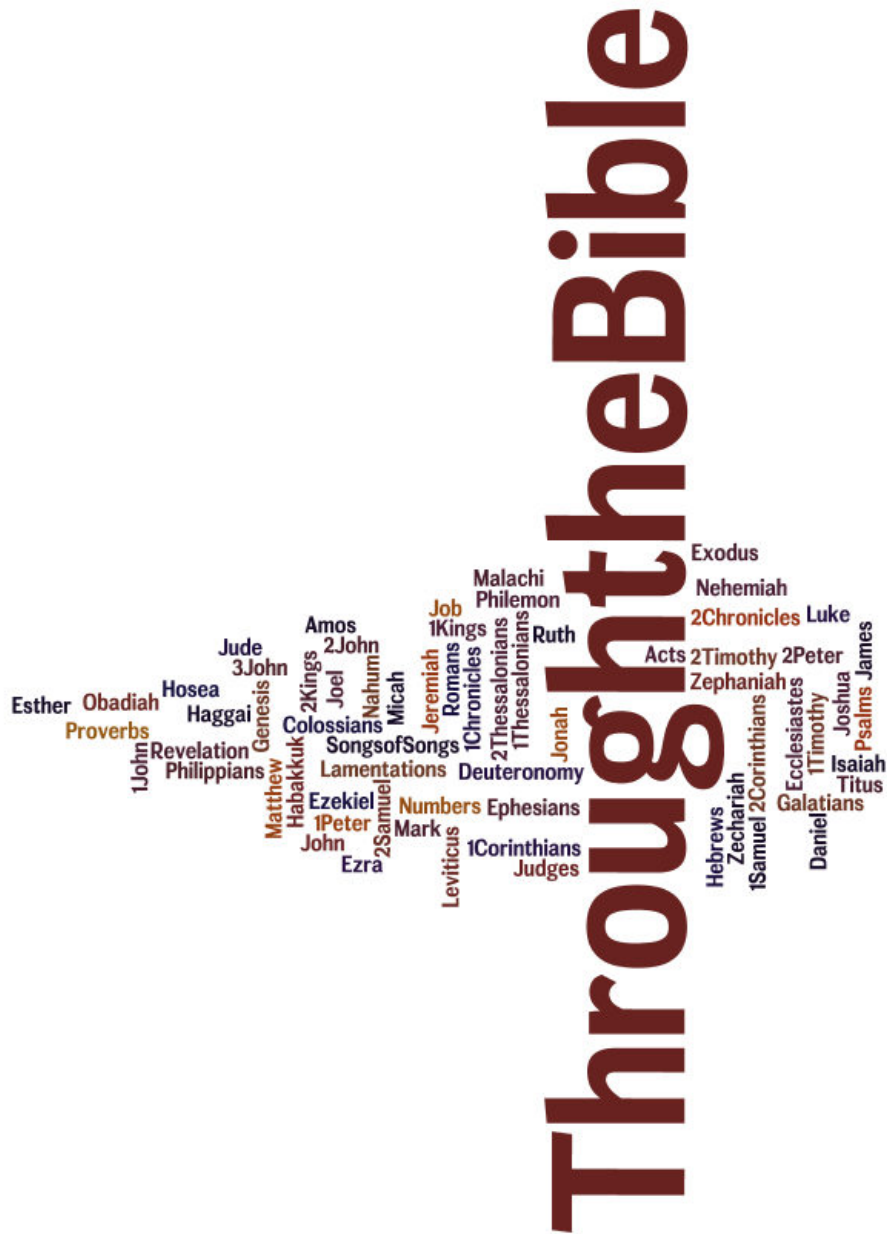




# Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action

in the community of Cornton



February 2014

*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (v.5)*

In the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, a bishop invites a poor man, Jean Valjean, to live in his home. Valjean then steals silverware from the bishop. The police arrest Valjean and bring him back to the bishop's home, but the bishop does something remarkable. He tells the police that he gave the silverware to Valjean, and he adds valuable candlesticks to Valjean's bag. The bishop's mercy changes the man's life.

This was an act of grace - a gift that was completely undeserved. Paul reminds us that *'at one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved'* (v.3). Even those of us who have never experienced physical imprisonment still know what it means to be "enslaved" by sin. Paul lays it on the line. We were selfish people, always looking out for our needs and wanting what others had. This manifested itself in how we would think, speak and act. Paul then reminds us that God has saved us from our sin. We didn't deserve it; he didn't do it because we were good people who did good deeds. Rather it was God's mercy and grace. Not only has he saved us from our sin but he has also made us heirs with Christ with the hope of eternal life.

On account of what we were and what we now are, Paul urges Titus, and us, to live well among people. We are different people and that should show in our lives. He speaks of being subject to those in authority over us – we are to respect them and be obedient towards them as far as that lies within our obedience to God and His Word. We are to be ready to do good to all, not to speak badly about others or to gossip about them, we are to be peaceable and considerate. In other words we are to live life the way God intended. We are to love him above all else and love our neighbour as ourselves. In essence consider how Jesus lived and do likewise.

**Pray:** thanking God for his undeserved grace that has saved us from our sin.

**Reflect:** does the way I live my life show that I am a new creation in Christ?

*I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. (v.4)*

Even though his father had died several decades earlier, every time Samuel Thornton spoke of him, he gave the impression he had just had a conversation with him. In fact, the memory of his father was so vivid that Samuel often referred to him in the present tense, as if he were still alive. What was most apparent, however, was the pleasure it gave Samuel to remember his father's life. A missionary to India and then to Japan, his father had been a godly example to his family. Each story brought to Samuel's mind the valuable spiritual lessons he had learned from his father while growing up.

Paul does the same when he thinks on Philemon. In fact, as we have seen in several of Paul's letters this is a recurring theme for him. He values his brothers and sisters in Christ and rejoices to hear news of what God is doing in and through them. He then prays for them that they would continue to know God, love God and serve God (e.g. v.6). Straight away there is a reminder to us to do likewise: to be interested in those we have met earlier in our faith and to rejoice in news from our missionary friends. So let's be encouraged to receive newsletters from missionaries with thanksgiving and remember them in prayer.

Paul has another purpose of writing here. This is him almost buttering up Philemon for what comes next. He thanks Philemon for being a servant of God and having a love for all the saints. And then he makes his request to accept back Onesimus. It would seem Onesimus was a slave who had done something wrong and run away. Normally if this happened the slaves were severely punished. Paul is calling for Philemon to be counter cultural in his dealing with Onesimus. What a witness that would. And what a witness we give when we act in a counter cultural way in our dealings with others. Let's not be trapped into acting like the world acts; let's follow Christ's example in all our dealings with others.

**Pray:** spend time praying for our missionaries.

**Reflect:** how can I bear witness for Jesus in my dealings with people today?

*...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. (v.2)*

In 1971, Ray Tomlinson was experimenting with ways people and computers could interact. When he sent a message from his computer through a network to a different unit in his office, he had sent the first e-mail. Now decades later, more than a billion e-mails are sent every day. Many contain important news from family and friends, but others may carry unwanted advertising or a destructive virus. A basic rule governing e-mail use is: “Don’t open it unless you trust the sender.”

God has sent us a message in the Person of His Son, and we can trust the Sender. In the Old Testament, God spoke to His people through the prophets and many rejected God’s Word. In fact God was silent for four hundred years because of this rejection of His Word. Everything that was spoken of through the prophets was pointing to this day when Jesus, God’s Son, would leave behind the glories of heaven to walk on this earth. Instead of using others to share His Word, God decided to send His own Word to earth. We read in John 1:14 that *‘the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’*

The writer to Hebrews uses incredible language in verse 3 when he says that *‘the Son is the radiance of God’s glory, and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.’* (v.4). Jesus is God and he came to show us God and he came to point us back to God the Father. Everything we want to know about God we can see in Jesus.

The writer simply wants to remind his readers who Jesus is and all that he accomplished on their behalf - he made the perfect sacrifice for their sins. He longs for them to persevere with their faith and not to go back to the old way of doing things that will not save them. The encouragement for us is likewise – keep looking to Jesus. God has spoken to us through him.

**Pray:** thanking God for the gift of His Son.

**Reflect:** am I regularly reading Scripture to learn more of God?

*Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (v.18)*

Joseph Mallord Turner, English painter, invited Charles Kingsley to his studio to see a picture of a storm at sea. In rapt admiration, Kingsley exclaimed, “It’s wonderful! It’s so realistic! How did you do it?”

The artist replied, “I went to the coast of Holland and engaged a fisherman to take me out to sea in the next storm. Entering his boat as a storm was brewing, I asked him to bind me to the mast. Then he steered his boat into the teeth of the storm. The storm raged with such fury that at times I longed to be in the bottom of the boat where the waves would blow over me. I could not, however. I was bound to the mast. Not only did I see the storm in its raging fury, I felt it! It blew into me, as it were, until I became a part of it. After this terrible ordeal, I returned to my studio and painted the picture.”

Jesus has gone through all the things you have gone through and are going to go through. He’s faced all the temptations. He knows what you’re going through. We are often tempted by fame and fortune. Jesus was tempted to throw away his relationship with God in order to worship the devil and gain the kingdoms of the world. He didn’t give in (it was already his anyway!). We experience the pain of betrayal and hurt by someone close to us. Jesus did as well – Judas, one of the twelve, betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver. We often feel alone and isolated. Jesus felt forsaken on the cross.

There is nothing we face that Jesus has not and so he is able to empathise with us. More than that, he is able to help us. He can comfort us and give us his peace. He can offer us strength to resist temptation. You are not alone in your struggles...the master walks with you.

**Pray:** asking God to help you with whatever it is you are struggling with at the moment.

**Reflect:** how do I cope with temptation? Is Jesus my first port of call?

*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. (v.12)*

On a sandy beach in Uruguay, giant concrete fingers partially submerged in sand reach up toward the sky. It is called the Monument to the Drowned. Locals just call it La Mano, “The Hand.” It was created by Chilean artist Mario Irarrázabal as a warning to swimmers about the danger of drowning. “The Hand” has become a tourist attraction, but its real purpose remains to remind swimmers about the perils of the sea.

The Word of God contains many of its own warning signs. Here in Hebrews 3 we find several warnings. This first is the call to not let go and to keep holding on to the hope we have in Jesus Christ. The readers of Hebrews were being tempted to turn away from their new found faith back to trust in the meaningless rituals of their past. The writer urges them to keep their thoughts fixed on Jesus. They are to consider the one they confess as Lord and remember all that he has done for them.

The second warning sign points them back to the children of Israel in the wilderness. God had led the Israelites out of Egypt, saving them from the land of oppression and suffering. It wasn't long before their unbelief and rebellion showed. They were thirsty and could see no water. They cried out that they would have been better back where they were. God had Moses strike the rock for water and then condemned them for their lack of faith.

The challenge here is to watch we do not allow sin to harden our hearts and forget about God's goodness to us. The writer encourages us to keep believing and trusting in Jesus. When we keep our eyes on him we will not forget all his benefits toward us. When we do take our eyes off of Jesus we are so easily tempted away by the wiles of the devil in the world around us. Watch out for the warning signs.

**Pray:** asking God for the strength and courage to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

**Reflect:** do I pay heed to the warning signs given in Scripture?

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses... (v.15)*

I read about a boy who noticed a sign, “Puppies for sale.” He asked, “How much do you want for the pups, mister?” “Twenty-five pounds, son.” The boy’s face dropped. “Well, sir, could I see them anyway?” The man whistled and the mother dog came around the corner, followed by four cute puppies, wagging their tails and yipping happily. Then lagging behind, another puppy came around the corner, dragging one hind leg. “What’s the matter with that one, sir?” the boy asked. “Well, son, that puppy is crippled. The vet took an X-ray and found that it doesn’t have a hip socket. It will never be right.”

The man was surprised when the boy said, “That’s the one I want. Could I pay you a little each week?” The owner replied, “But, son, you don’t seem to understand. That pup will never be able to run or even walk right. He’s going to be a cripple forever. Why would you want a pup like that?”

The boy reached down and pulled up his trouser leg, revealing a brace. “I don’t walk too good, either.” Looking down at the puppy, the boy continued, “That puppy is going to need a lot of love and understanding. It’s not easy being crippled!” The man said, “You can have the puppy for free. I know you’ll take good care of him.”

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that we have a Saviour who cares and who understands our situation. Jesus lived on this earth and experienced all we experience; he was tempted in every way yet did not sin. He knows the struggles and the difficulties. That means we can go to him for help and support. The text goes on to say *‘Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence’*. When we are struggling with pain, or life in general, or temptation we can boldly pray and the One we pray to knows what we are facing and will help us.

**Pray:** asking God for help in areas of life where you are struggling today.

**Reflect:** do I approach the throne of grace with confidence? Why or why not?

*In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. (v.12)*

Even the weakest among us can participate in sports, but only the strongest can survive as spectators. According to a heart specialist, when you become a spectator rather than a participant, the wrong things go up and the wrong things come down. Body weight, blood pressure, heart rate, cholesterol, and triglycerides go up. Vital capacity, oxygen consumption, flexibility, stamina, and strength go down.

Being an onlooker in the arena of Christian living is also risky. The wrong things go up, and the wrong things come down. Criticism, discouragement, disillusionment, and boredom go up. Sensitivity to sin and the needs of others, and receptivity to the Word of God go down. Sure, there's a certain amount of thrill and excitement in hearing someone's testimony about how God has worked. But it's nothing like knowing that joy yourself. There's no substitute for piling up your own experiences of faith, and using your own God-given abilities on behalf of others.

The writer to the Hebrews gets that here which is why he warns his readers that they are not growing. He says they are slow to learn. They should be teachers of others by now but they still need taught. And whilst in a sense we are all life long learners in God's eyes, there should be a progression. We should continually see God at work in our lives and want to share that with others. The disciple should become the disciple maker.

One of the ways for that to come about is for us to be found regularly reading God's Word and applying it to our lives. When we learn something in Scripture we should share that with someone else that they too might learn from our experiences and from what God is teaching us. It's not enough to let the preacher read God's Word to us on a Sunday – we have to be reading it each day ourselves.

**Pray:** asking God for help to cultivate a regular bible reading habit.

**Reflect:** do I share with others what God is teaching me through His Word?



*Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity. (v.1)*

Lobsters have to leave their shells in order to grow. They moult about 25 times a year when they are young and twice a year when they are older. They need the shell to protect them from being torn apart, yet when they grow, the old shell must be abandoned. If they did not abandon it, the old shell would soon become their prison - and finally their casket. The tricky part for the lobster is the brief period of time between when the old shell is discarded and the new one is formed. During that terribly vulnerable period, the transition must be scary to the lobster. Hungry schools of fish are ready to make them a part of their food chain. For awhile at least, that old shell must look pretty good.

We are not so different from lobsters. To change and grow, we must sometimes shed our shells. These are the things we have come to depend upon – maybe structures or frameworks or even people. Sometimes they are even habits we had before coming to Christ. We have to lay them behind in order to learn more from God and become more like the people he would have us be. This can be scary for us. We very quickly become comfortable with what we know and leaving it behind is a wrench. And yet that is what we have to do in order to grow.

The writer to the Hebrews began to challenge the people in chapter 5 about moving on to solid food. Here he continues that theme by saying we are to leave the elementary teachings about Jesus and go on to maturity. This refers to the basic truths about the Christian faith: who Jesus Christ is, what He came to do, how we enter into a relationship with Him, how we live the Christian life, etc. But beyond these basic truths, there is much in Scripture that is deep and nourishing. Someone has said that the Bible is like an ocean, deep enough to drown an elephant, but shallow enough at the shore for a toddler to play. We have to start digging deeper. Read the whole of the Bible and not just the gospels.

**Pray:** asking God to help us grow deeper in our understanding of him.

**Reflect:** how do I know I am growing in maturity in Christ?

*Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (v.25)*

During the Revolutionary War a pastor named John P. Miller once learned that one of his greatest enemies was to be hanged for his crimes. Upon hearing this, Miller set out on foot sixty miles to visit General George Washington and intercede for the man's life. The general, upon hearing the request, stated that he was sorry but he could not pardon Miller's friend. "Friend!" said Miller, "that man is my worst enemy." "Well then," said Washington, "that puts matters in a whole new light." Seeing the preacher's forgiveness for his staunchest enemy, the general signed the pardon. Then Miller quickly carried it another fifteen miles to the execution site, arriving just as the condemned man was trudging toward the scaffold.

We often find ourselves in great trouble. But too often even our friends don't seem to understand and are willing to pull the lever on the scaffold rather than help us. We need a priest. We need an intercessor. And the great news is we have one. His name is Jesus. And he will never let us down and he will never leave us.

The writer to the Hebrews has already spoken of Jesus being the great high priest and here he reminds us again. He tells us that priests live and die, just like every other human being. They are able to serve us for a while but their time comes to an end. Jesus, however, is the great high priest who is alive forevermore. More than being an ordinary priest who can offer sacrifice on our behalf on a regular basis for sin, Jesus made a sacrifice once and for all. He does not need to repeat that sacrifice. Our debt is paid. He has saved us completely. He has gained us forgiveness in the Father's eyes. And the great news is he continues to intercede for us before the throne of grace.

**Pray:** thanking God for our complete salvation in Jesus Christ.

**Reflect:** do I trust fully in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross on my behalf?

*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.  
(v.12)*

A newly ordained preacher and his young wife were talking about being more considerate of each other. The good wife promised that she would stop being so critical of his sleep-inducing sermons. He, in return, promised to honour her privacy and stop looking through her dresser drawers. The preacher was true to his word, and never looked through his wife's dresser drawers; the good wife was never openly critical of her husband's sermons; and their marriage progressed smoothly.

After 50 years, their children gave a great party to celebrate the golden anniversary of the preacher and his wife. Many people came to congratulate the happy couple, and brought lovely gifts. That evening, as they were putting the gifts away, the preacher saw that his wife had left one dresser drawer slightly open. He tried as hard as he could to withstand the temptation, but he finally opened the drawer and looked inside. There he found 3 eggs, and £10,000.00, in notes of varied denominations. He was greatly puzzled by this, and went to question his wife. "Oh," she said. "Well, you remember when we spoke of being more considerate with each other all those years ago?" The preacher, feeling profoundly guilty, answered "yes." "Well," she continued, "I promised to stop criticising your boring sermons, but every time you gave a sermon that was a real snoozer, I put an egg into that drawer." The preacher smiled. "Well, that's not so bad. 50 years of sermons and only 3 eggs! But what about all that money?" His wife quietly responded, "Every time I got a dozen eggs, I sold them."

The great news for us is that God does not keep a note of our sin. Jesus paid the price once and for all on the cross of Calvary. If we have put our trust and faith in Jesus then our sins are gone – and forgotten. God has forgiven us. It's time to leave our sin in the past and live for him from now on.

**Pray:** thanking God for the forgiveness which is ours in Christ Jesus.

**Reflect:** is my sin left in the past or does it still have a hold over me?

*Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. (v.27)*

Years ago, in a frontier town in America, a horse bolted and ran away with a wagon that had a little child in it. A young man risked his life to catch the horse, stop it, and rescue the child. Sadly, the rescued child grew up to become a lawless man. One day he stood before a judge to be sentenced for a serious crime. The prisoner recognised the judge as the same man who, years before, had saved his life. He pled for mercy on the basis of that experience. But the words from the bench silenced all his pleas: “Young man, then I was your saviour; today I am your judge, and I must sentence you to be hanged”.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks once more of our salvation and the sacrifice of Jesus to purchase it. It is a recurring theme for him. He wants his readers to grasp the awesome miracle of salvation through the sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God. He wants to remind them who it is they have put their faith and to encourage them to keep following Jesus. Here again he reminds us that the high priest had to regularly make sacrifice on the altar for sin. But then came the great high priest, Jesus. He made the perfect sacrifice once and for all. He cleansed our sin through his own blood shed on the altar of the cross. Jesus was ‘*sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.*’

He also reminds us that we are all destined to die and when we do we will stand before God’s judgement seat. On that day the only thing that will save us is faith in Jesus – none of our good works will count.

Today, Jesus Christ offers salvation to all who will trust in Him. But if we refuse to turn to Him in faith, one day we will stand before Him as our righteous Judge. Will you die and face judgment? Or, will you trust in Christ’s supreme sacrifice of Himself for your sins and receive His salvation?

**Pray:** thanking God for the shed blood of Jesus that saves us.

**Reflect:** do I regularly look to the cross and praise God for my salvation?

*Let us not give up meeting together. (v.25)*

In a certain mountain village in Europe several centuries ago, a nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. At last he decided to build them a church. No one saw the complete plans for the church until it was finished. When the people gathered, they marvelled at its beauty and completeness. Then someone asked, “But where are the lamps? How will it be lighted?” The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls. Then he gave to each family a lamp which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship. “Each time you are here the area where you are seated will be lighted,” the nobleman said. “Each time you are not here, that area will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God’s house will be dark.”

The writer to the Hebrews offers that same encouragement to keep meeting together in order to worship God and encourage one another. Lone Christians soon become backslidden Christians. We were made to be in fellowship with one another. We need the support and encouragement of each other as life can be tough and difficult. The writer here is writing to encourage his readers to persevere in their faith and to keep going. There are many temptations around them to give up and to go back to the old way of being and doing. Yet he has reminded them again and again of the sacrifice made by Jesus on the cross of Calvary.

Here he explains to them that through Jesus’ sacrifice the way has been opened for them to have a relationship with God once more. He urges them to draw near to God and to hold fast to the hope they have in Christ. As they do that he encourages them to spur one another on and one of the best ways we can do that is by meeting together. We can do that by being in church Sunday by Sunday, by participating in the prayer meeting, by serving together at other church activities, and even by having one another round for coffee.

**Pray:** thanking God for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Reflect:** how can I encourage others this week?

*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (v.1)*

During the terrible days of the Blitz, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as quickly as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father's voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, "I can't see you!" The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings, called to the silhouette of his son, "But I can see you. Jump!" The boy jumped, because he trusted his father.

The Christian faith enables us to face life or meet death, not because we can see, but with the certainty that we are seen; not that we know all the answers, but that we are known. We have a Father who loves us. Jump. You may not think He's there sometimes. You may question if He's still there sometimes. But faith is coming to trust in Him even when things look like He's not there.

And the writer here encourages his readers to continue placing their trust and faith in Jesus. He explains to them that '*faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*' To explain this further he offers many practical examples from the Old Testament Scriptures – stories these people would know and people they will have heard about. He speaks of Noah who obeyed God and built the ark even although he could see no water. He tells of Abraham who left everything in obedience to God to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance. He speaks of Abraham's obedience in being prepared to sacrifice his own son. And so he continues.

We have many examples in this hall of faith of those who have trusted in God and God did not let them down. He will not disappoint us either. Jump into his arms and allow him to guide you through life always.

**Pray:** asking God to increase your faith.

**Reflect:** in what areas of my life do I need to trust God more?

*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (v.1)*

At 7pm on October 20, 1968, a few thousand spectators remained in the Mexico City Olympic Stadium. It was cool and dark. The last of the marathon runners, each exhausted, were being carried off to first-aid stations. More than an hour earlier, Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia – looking as fresh as when he started the race – crossed the finish line, the winner of the 26 mile, 385 yard event.

As the remaining spectators prepared to leave, those sitting near the marathon gates suddenly heard the sirens and police whistles. All eyes turned to the gate. A lone figure wearing number 36 and the colours of Tanzania entered the stadium. His name was John Stephen Akhwari. He was the last man to finish the marathon. He had fallen during the race and injured his knee and ankle. Now, with his leg bloodied and bandaged, he grimaced with each hobbling step around the 400 metre track.

The spectators rise and applauded him. After crossing the finish line, Akhwari slowly walked off the field. Later a reporter asked Akhwari the question on everyone's mind: 'why did you continue the race after you were so badly injured?' He replied, 'my country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it.'

We are called to stay in the race that God has called us to and to finish it well. The writer to the Hebrews encourages his readers to persevere in the race of faith. They are tempted to give up and to go back to what they know but he says '*let us fix our eyes on Jesus*' (v.2). And he offers some practical advice as they live life: remember the faithful followers who have gone before us – look at their lives and be encouraged by their faith; remove faults – confess your sin and turn from it; run with faith – don't stop or give up; and remain focused – keep your eyes on Jesus. And that is the key for us too – to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. When we take them off of him we wander away. Let's remain focussed and keep going.

**Pray:** asking God for the strength to keep living for him.

**Reflect:** what distracts me from living for Jesus?

*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.” (v.5)*

A Jewish man in Hungary went to his rabbi and complained, “Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?” The rabbi answered, “Take your goat into the room with you.” The man was incredulous, but the rabbi insisted, “Do as I say and come back in a week.”

A week later the man returned looking more distraught than before. “We can’t stand it,” he told the rabbi. “The goat is filthy.” The rabbi said, “Go home and let the goat out, and come back in a week.” A week later the man returned, radiant, exclaiming, “Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there’s no goat - only the nine of us.” Contentment is more a matter of our perspective than of our circumstances, isn’t it!

As we approach the end of Hebrews we discover the writer leaving some concluding advice for his readers. These cover a variety of everyday issues that concerned the people. This was real practical advice to follow. Money was an issue and a temptation as it is in our day still. Somehow or other we are always attracted by money and desire more of it. The writer urges the people to be content with what they have. They do not need the latest gadgets and clothes to be content for the truth is when the next newest gadget comes out we will want it too. The cycle never ends.

He offers a reason why they can be content – God is with them always. The trouble with money, clothes and gadgets is that they only satisfy us for a short time – they are here today and gone tomorrow. Only God brings that lasting satisfaction in life. He is our all in all. He is the one who made us and knows us. He knows what we need. And the writer reminds us that God will never leave us nor forsake us. Let’s stop trying to buy our contentment; simply trust in God and rest secure in his presence, love and care.

**Pray:** thanking God for his presence with us always.

**Reflect:** am I content in Christ?



*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (v.22)*

I read about a man in New York City who died at the age of 63 without ever having had a job. He spent his entire adult life in college. During those years he acquired so many academic degrees that they “looked like the alphabet” behind his name. Why did this man spend his entire life in college? When he was a child, a wealthy relative died who had named him as a beneficiary in his will. It stated that he was to be given enough money to support him every year as long as he stayed in school. And it was to be discontinued when he had completed his education. The man met the terms of the will, but by remaining in school indefinitely he turned a technicality into a steady income for life - something his benefactor never intended. Unfortunately, he spent thousands of hours listening to professors and reading books but never “doing.” He acquired more and more knowledge but didn’t put it into practice.

This reminds me of what James said: ‘*Do not merely listen to the word...do what it says*’ (v.22). If we read the Bible or listen as it is taught but fail to put to work what we have learned, we are as bad as that man with his string of degrees. His education was of no practical benefit to anyone. Hearing must be matched by doing.

Obedience should always be the bottom line of Bible study or biblical preaching. Correct application must always be built on correct interpretation. But to study the word just to fill your head with knowledge, without applying the word, short-circuits God’s purpose in giving it.

The challenge for us then as we read God’s Word each day is to consider it fully. We are to look intently (v.25) at it and see what God is teaching us through it and what it means for us in our own situation. We then apply it to our lives and that will result in changed character and conduct. And we are to keep doing what it says – this is not some one off application.

**Pray:** asking God to help us read and obey His Word.

**Reflect:** do I apply what I learn from Scripture to everyday life?

*In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.  
(v.17)*

An old boatman painted the word “faith” on one oar of his boat and “works” on the other. He was asked his reason for this. In answer, he slipped the oar with “faith” into the water and rowed. The boat, of course, made a very tight circle. Returning to the dock, the boatman then said, “Now, let’s try ‘works’ without ‘faith’ and see what happens.” The oar marked “works” was put in place and the boatman began rowing with just the “works” oar. Again the boat went into a tight circle but in the opposite direction. When the boatman again returned to the wharf, he interpreted his experiment in these strong and convincing words, “You see, to make a passage across the lake, one needs both oars working simultaneously in order to keep the boat in a straight and narrow way. If one does not have the use of both oars, he makes no progress either across the lake nor as a Christian.”

James is trying to encourage his readers here in James 2 that it is not simply enough to have faith – we have to put that faith into action. Now of course he is not saying that we need to work to be saved. Paul has already dealt with that back in Ephesians 2 - we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone so that God alone gets the glory. Jesus Christ died on a cross to pay for our sins. He has offered to us God’s forgiveness and freedom from judgment if we will receive it by faith.

What he is saying is that faith in Christ will change us. We become new creations and the old way of being and doing goes. We will lay aside the acts of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19) and we will begin to show the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). We will show in our actions our faith in Jesus. We will begin to love people the way Jesus did; we will be kind and gentle toward them; we will care for them and support them; we will help them. Genuine faith will show itself in how we think, speak and act. Our faith will be accompanied by good deeds.

**Pray:** that God would continue you to change us so we become more like Jesus.

**Reflect:** in what practical way can I express my faith in action today?

*Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. (v.5)*

A woman repeated a bit of gossip about a neighbour. Within a few days the whole community knew the story. The person it concerned was deeply hurt and offended. Later the woman responsible for spreading the rumour learned that it was completely untrue. She was very sorry and went to a wise old sage to find out what she could do to repair the damage. “Go to the marketplace,” he said, “and purchase a chicken, and have it killed. Then on your way home, pluck its feathers and drop them one by one along the road.” Although surprised by this advice, the woman did what she was told.

The next day the wise man said, “Now go and collect all those feathers you dropped yesterday and bring them back to me.” The woman followed the same road, but to her dismay, the wind had blown the feathers all away. After searching for hours, she returned with only three in her hand. “You see,” said the old sage, “it’s easy to drop them, but it’s impossible to get them back. So it is with gossip. It doesn’t take much to spread a rumour, but once you do, you can never completely undo the wrong.”

The tongue is a dangerous instrument and James warns his readers all about here in James 3. He speaks of how a forest can be set on fire by just one small spark and that illustrates the danger of one word wrongly spoken. That’s similar to the illustration of the chicken feathers. He speaks of how animals are tamed and trained from birth but the tongue can never be tamed.

Our tongues have the power to encourage or to upset, to cause good or hurt. We have to be careful every time we open our mouths that the right words come out. Take a second longer to think before you speak.

**Pray:** for forgiveness for those times we have allowed our tongues to speak unkind and untrue words.

**Reflect:** how can I learn to watch what I say?

*What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (v.14)*

In 1899, Charles H. Duell, Commissioner in the U.S. Office of Patents said, “Everything that can be invented has been invented.” Since then, the world has witnessed the advent of airplanes, cars, manned space travel, plastics, computers, mobile phones, ipads, and literally millions of other devices and products that we use and take for granted every day. I guess Mr. Duell just couldn’t see too far into the future.

Magazine publisher J. I. Rodale, a zealous advocate of health foods, claimed at the age of 72 that he would live to be 100. The same week that his prediction appeared in The New York Times, he was being interviewed for a television program, again claiming that his bones were as strong as ever. Moments after making his boast, he died of a heart attack.

The truth is we simply do not know what the future holds. Life is short and fragile. We are, as James tells us, a vapour that is here for a little time then vanishes. To my mind, it is a great blessing to know that God has veiled the future. If we were able to see it, then our lives would be altered. If we knew that prosperity was coming, we would live carelessly. If we knew that adversity or trouble was the forecast, then we would live with constant anxiety and fear. People would die a thousand deaths before their physical death ever arrived.

Certainly, God is good to keep the future a secret. James deals with this idea in these verses. He tells his readers that even though they cannot know the future, they should deal with it honestly. They are told not to presume on a future which they can not control, or makes plans regarding the future without taking God into consideration. They are also told not to postpone until the future those things God has commanded to be done today. The challenge then is to humble ourselves before God and obey His Word in our daily lives.

**Pray:** asking God to help us live for him one day at a time.

**Reflect:** do I like to make plans for the future?

*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (v.16)*

George Muller (1805-1897) was a rebellious Prussian young man whom God saved in his twenties. Muller later founded an orphanage in Bristol, England. He was concerned about the needs of the many orphans whom he saw on the streets, of course. But his primary reason for founding the orphanage was to demonstrate that God is still a prayer-hearing God and that it is not in vain to trust in Him.

Muller and his new bride literally sold or gave away everything that they owned and gave the money to the Lord's work. Then they set about praying for God to provide for their own needs and the needs of the orphans. Muller's theme verse was Psalm 81:10, '*Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.*' For over 60 years, he saw God faithfully provide for as many as 2,000 orphans at a time, all in response to secret prayer.

Muller never disclosed any needs to potential donors, even if they asked. He and his staff would pray and often see God provide the exact amount that they needed on the day they needed it. Muller gave God the glory by writing an annual narrative of how the Lord had provided, once the needs had already been met.

Muller's story encourages us to pray and to be faithful in prayer for prayer is powerful. James picks up that theme as he draws his letter to a close. He encourages us to pray when we are in trouble and when we are rejoicing. He urges us to call on the elders to pray over us when we are ill. And he even suggests we pray with and for one another. He calls us to prayer because '*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*' Now of course prayer is powerful and effective not because of who we are but because of the one we pray to. He is the one who made the world and sustains it. So next time you are in need, turn to the Lord first of all in prayer.

**Pray:** for a specific need in your life or of someone else in the church family.

**Reflect:** do I regularly pray with and for others in the church family?

*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you. (v.3)*

On April 5th, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo for his political activities against the German Nazi regime. He had been speaking out against the Nazis, but eventually his words caught up with him. He saw that the church of Jesus Christ was being persecuted and that his country was heading toward the abyss, and he decided to do something about it. Looking back, he felt he had become involved in some situations that he perhaps should have avoided.

Two years later, he found himself facing the death sentence. On the day when the sentence was to be carried out, a Sunday, he led a service in the prison which housed men of various nationalities. One prisoner, an English army officer who was also facing the death sentence but was later set free, wrote these words describing the last day of Bonhoeffer's life:

*Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident, and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive... He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near... On Sunday, April 8, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer conducted a little service of worship and spoke to us in a way that went to the heart of all of us. He found just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, and the thoughts and resolutions it had brought us. He had hardly ended his last prayer when the door opened and two civilians entered. They said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." That had only one meaning for all prisoners - the gallows. We said good-bye to him. He took me aside: "This is the end; but for me it is the beginning of life." The next day he was hanged in Flossenburg.*

"This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life." What was it that so possessed this man, that at the very moment of his death, he could say that? What was the hope that he possessed, and why was he able to cling to it? Why could not even the sentence of death take it away? He hoped in Jesus. His trust was in Jesus and all he had accomplished on the cross.

***Continued on next page***

Peter gives the same answer in the first chapter of his first letter. He reminds his readers that they have been selected (chosen) by God, sanctified by the Spirit and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus. They are saved. The price has been paid for their sin. He goes on to tell them '*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you.*' (v.3)

Not only are our sins forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross, but through his resurrection from the dead we have the hope of eternal life set before us. We are heading to glory one day. This world is not the end. And so we can have the same hope as Bonhoeffer – that no matter what happens here on earth, one day we will be with our Saviour in glory for all eternity.

**Pray:** thanking God for his grace and mercy.

**Reflect:** do I have the hope of heaven set firmly in my mind?

*Like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. (v.2)*

In 1789, a group of mutineers put their officers on a longboat, took control of the H.M.S. Bounty, and sailed to Tahiti to enjoy a comfortable life. Fearing punishment, some of them, along with several Polynesians, later moved to uninhabited Pitcairn Island and burned the ship so there would be no evidence. Despite the South Pacific paradise-like setting, sexual immorality, jealousy, anger, alcohol, and disease took their toll until there was only one Englishman, ten women, and many children left.

The remaining Englishman, Alexander Smith, discovered a Bible in the ship's goods, and thankfully, the next-to-last man had taught him to read before he died. Smith studied the Word, decided it held the answer to the community's problems, and initiated Sunday worship and daily prayer times for the remaining people. He had a craving for the word and desired to read it daily and apply what they were learning to their lives. In 1808, an American ship happening upon the island was surprised to discover a thriving group of 35 English-speaking Christians.

Craving the Word brought life, real vibrant life to the people. Peter speaks of that as he ends chapter 1 and begins chapter 2. Peter is reminding his readers that they need God's Word to live life well. He is encouraging them to build up a hunger and desire for it. And he does so by reminding them of new born babies. New born babies basically eat and sleep. They look for milk from their mother and then when they are satisfied they sleep. Through this regular intake of milk they grow and develop.

When we take in the Word of God and learn more of who He is and how He wants us to live, we grow up in our faith. As we apply God's Word to our lives we grow to be more like the people He has called us to be. The Psalmist said in Psalm 34:8 '*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*' Once we taste it and see how good it is, we will crave it more and more.

**Pray:** asking God to whet our appetite for His Word.

**Reflect:** do I crave the pure spiritual milk of the Word of God?



*Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect. (v.7)*

I read a true story about a man who made a private vow to try to be a loving, giving, unselfish husband for the two weeks of the family's holiday. He worked hard at noticing his wife, of attending to her needs, of doing what she wanted to do, even if he really rather would have done something else. It went great. Toward the end of the time, he made a new vow to keep on choosing to love his wife like this.

But on the last night of the holiday, his wife was obviously upset. Finally she blurted, "Tom, do you know something I don't?" "What do you mean?" he asked. "Well ... that check-up I had several weeks ago ... our doctor ... did he tell you something about me? Tom, you've been so good to me ... am I dying?" It took a moment for it all to sink in. Then Tom burst out laughing, took her in his arms, and said, "No, honey, you're not dying; I'm just starting to live."

The truth is we should be treating each other well at all times. And this applies to both husbands and wives. Here in 1 Peter 3 we find Peter speaking to husbands and wives. He encourages women to be godly wives through their character and conduct. He urges them to concentrate on their inner beauty over their outer beauty. It's not that she should neglect her outward appearance but that her heart should be right before God. In her dealings with her husband she acts with purity and reverence.

Husbands are called to spend time with their wives, to know their wives, to treat their wives well, and to pray for and with their wives. Guys get so caught up in their work that they are not always home – make time to be with your wife. And treat her well – be kind and considerate. Show her you love her as well.

**Pray:** for those who are married that they would continue to grow in their love for one another.

**Reflect:** how can I show my love for my husband/wife today?

*As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. (v.2)*

The ermine, a small animal known for its snow-white fur, lives in the forests of northern Europe. God has put into this animal an instinctive drive to protect his glossy coat from becoming soiled. Hunters capitalise on this trait. Instead of setting a mechanical trap, they find the ermine's home in a cleft of a rock or a hollow tree and daub the entrance and the interior with tar. Then their dogs start the chase, and the frightened ermine flees toward his home. But finding it covered with tar, he won't enter, even to save his life. He will face the yelping dogs who hold him at bay until the hunters capture him rather than soiling his white fur. For the ermine, purity is more dear than life.

I wonder to what levels you will go to protect your purity. You have chosen to follow Christ Jesus. You have crowned him Lord of your life. You have turned from your sin to live for him. But what happens when temptation comes? What happens when suffering comes? What happens when things do not go the way you expected them to go? Do you do whatever it takes to protect your purity? Do you dig deep to maintain your personal holiness? Do you cling to Christ and fight to live his way?

Well Peter calls for his readers to arm themselves for living here in 1 Peter 4. We cannot live passively in life, we have to be proactive. We have to decide to keep living for Jesus. If we do not actively decide to do this daily then we will fall away. We are armed for living by reading and applying God's Word, and by being in prayer continually asking for his strength to resist temptation and live for him. We are armed for living by having the same attitude as Christ, by being free from sin, and by living for the will of God. We are armed for living by remembering the life we once lived as sinners lost in sin and by remembering the life we now live as children of God.

**Pray:** asking God for strength and help to live for him each and every day in life.

**Reflect:** do I actively put on the armour of God each morning?

*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (v.7)*

Spurgeon shared this story: There was a man who was walking along the road with a pack on his back. He was growing weary and was therefore glad when a gentleman came along in a carriage and asked him to take a seat with him. The gentleman noticed that he kept his pack strapped to his shoulders, and so he said, “Why do you not put your pack down?” “Why sir”, said the traveller, “I did not venture to impose, it was very kind of you to take me up, and I could not expect you to carry my pack as well.” “Why,” said his friend, “do you not see that whether your pack is on your back or off your back, I have to carry it!”

We sometimes do the same with God. Everyday, God carries us during the day. Still, we insist in carrying our heavy baskets of worries and fear of the future, for family, kids, spouse, money, job, etc? We are carried by Almighty hands, watched over by sleepless eyes and God plans our future. Let us then relax and lay down everything in God’s Hands.

That is certainly the message Peter is offering here in the last chapter of his first letter. He knows it is hard. Life is hard. He has suffered much for his faith but he has remained faithful to the Lord. And yet I suspect he sees some of those he writes to getting ready to give up. More than that they are trying to work out themselves how they can cope and deal with situations. So he urges them to humble themselves before God (v.6) for he knows God is mighty to save. Then he tells them to cast all their worries and fears and anxiety on to the Lord for the Lord cares for them (v.7).

How often do we try and do things on our own? And the Lord is often the last resort. We try everything we can think of before praying and asking for help. Peter urges us to go to God straight away. He cares for us. He loves us. He sent His son to die for us. Therefore we should take all of our worries to him. More than that we should allow him to carry them as well. There is no point taking them to the throne of grace only to lay them down and pick them up again.

**Pray:** casting all your burdens on Jesus.

**Reflect:** do I cast my burdens on Jesus or do I try to deal with them myself?

*For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (v.8)*

Billy Graham told about the conversion of H. C. Morrison, the founder of Asbury Theological Seminary. He said that Morrison, a farm worker at the time, was ploughing in a field one day when he saw an old Methodist preacher coming by on his horse.

Morrison knew the elderly gentleman to be a gracious, godly man. As he watched the old saint go by, a great sense of conviction of sin came over Morrison and he dropped to his knees. There between the furrows in his field, alone, he gave his life to God. When he concluded the story, Billy Graham earnestly prayed, "Oh, God, make me a holy man."

People see us. They watch how we act. They read us like a book. In fact someone once said we are the only bible some people will ever read. If that is the case we better be living good lives for Jesus.

Peter addresses the character qualities in our life here in his second letter. He begins by reminding his readers that they are saved through faith in Christ. With that faith comes God's divine power on us which gives us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him. We have to spend time in God's Word then learning of him and his ways.

On top of that Peter says there are some steps for us to take. And he urges us to make the effort and to get going with these. We have to add the following to our faith: goodness, knowledge, self control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. We cannot do this on our way but thankfully we have His Spirit at work within us. The more time we spend with Jesus as well, the more we will become like him. So keep reading all about him in the gospels.

**Pray:** that God would make us holy people who are living witnesses for him.

**Reflect:** what area of my life do I need to work on with Christ's help?

*But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. (v.1)*

A New York City couple received through the mail two tickets to a smash Broadway hit. Oddly, the gift arrived without a note, and they wondered who had sent it. But they still attended the show and enjoyed it immensely. Returning to their apartment, they discovered that their bedroom had been ransacked. Valuable furs and jewels were missing. On the pillow was this simple note: “Now you know.”

Like that nameless thief, a false teacher knows what people want and appeals to their desires (2 Peter 2). He doesn't wear a lapel pin to warn of his lies, but he comes disguised as a representative of the truth. He claims he will enrich lives, but those who follow him often learn at a high cost that they have been deceived.

Jesus, however, is a teacher we can trust completely. He offers us the gift of eternal life because He truly loves us. Accepting His gift of salvation is the first step in protecting ourselves from the deceptive gifts that false teachers offer. But even believers can be deceived by false teaching. That's why God's Word exhorts us to study the Scriptures (1 Peter 2:2), test what we hear (1 John 4:1), and grow in the faith (2 Peter 1:5-9). That way, we won't suddenly discover that our spiritual life is in disarray.

At the end of chapter 1, Peter lays out the foundation for our faith, which is the inspired Word of God. He knows that he is about to pass off the scene and he wants his readers to stand firmly on the truth of God's Word. But he also knows that false prophets are a perpetual threat to God's people. So in contrast to the godly prophets who spoke for God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, he begins chapter 2 by contrasting them with the false prophets who have plagued God's people down through the ages. We have to beware that there are and will be false teachers among us. Test everything against God's Word.

**Pray:** for God's protection from false teachers.

**Reflect:** do I test everything against Scripture?

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (v.9)*

In 1942, General Douglas MacArthur was forced to leave the Philippines before the Japanese conquered the islands. As he left, he gave the Filipino people this promise; "I will return!" Though many doubted whether or not MacArthur would be able to keep his promise, in the autumn of 1944 he did return. He returned in power and defeated the Japanese army, retaking the Philippines just as he said he would. Many had doubted the great General, but he was true to his word.

Two thousand years ago, a man named Jesus Christ walked upon this earth. He was different from any man who ever lived before, or has lived since. He was different because He was God in the flesh. He came to this world to live a perfect life and to die a perfect death to make a sinful people perfect and to give them eternal life. After He died and rose again, He returned to His Father. Before He left, however, He made this great promise; '*I will come back.*' (John 14:3) Many doubted the truth of His promise then and many doubt it today.

Peter had to deal with a doubting crowd. In these verses, he handles their objections and provides genuine hope for all those that believe Jesus will really come again. He refers to these doubters as scoffers. They don't want to acknowledge the possibility of Christ's return because they want to keep living in their present lifestyles. Peter goes on to remind his readers that God's timings are not ours, and that any delay is because he is giving us as much time as possible to come to repentance. God doesn't want anyone to perish so he is giving us time to witness and unbelievers time to repent and come to saving faith in Jesus.

God keeps his promises. He has kept everyone so far so we should not doubt that he will keep this one too. As we look forward to Christ's return we should keep living for Jesus (v.14).

**Pray:** for God's help in living blameless lives.

**Reflect:** do I live in light of Christ's promised return?