



TOPIC:

*perseverance*

# *Christian* FOUNDATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

# Christian FOUNDATIONS

Christian Foundations is a series of studies that helps people discover (and rediscover) the FOUNDATIONS of believing in, living life with and serving Jesus.

Each module is centred around the rhythm of daily self-study and reflection on Scripture and weekly discussion with a Christian mentor (or mentoring group).

**The daily rhythm involves:**

- A brief introduction to the Scripture reading
- The study of a Scripture passage
- Reflection and journaling on the passage
- A short devotion flowing from the passage
- A prayer to pray aloud
- An action to take in response to what you have learned

The modules can be completed in any number or order depending on your needs, but for someone completing all the modules a **suggested order is:**

1. Identity
2. Spirit
3. Growth
4. Service
5. Mission
6. Perseverance
7. Baptism

## INSTRUCTIONS

ORGANISE with a mentor or mentoring group when you will meet and which module you will do together each week.

STUDY daily one of the five Bible studies (Study 1-5), and write any reflections, questions and revelations. It will probably take you about 20 minutes to complete the reading and reflection. (If a daily study proves too difficult, you could decide to spread each module over two weeks.)

MEET weekly (or fortnightly) with your mentor (and other members if in a group). There is a guide for this discussion at the end of each module.

## ADVICE

Decide in advance exactly where and when you will spend the time each day reading and reflecting on the Scripture passage and input. With a regular time and place, it is much more likely that you will get the studies done.

Make sure you don't "move on" from each module until you have spoken and debriefed with your mentor or mentoring group about this important foundation of Christian living. Be completely honest with your mentor. If you don't understand something, are having doubts, or forget to do the studies, just tell them. This isn't a test you can get wrong. It is an investment into the rest of your life with God.

Write down your questions and reflections and bring this to your weekly meeting. It would also help to have a look at the discussion questions before you meet with your mentor. Pray that God will use these studies to grow you and release you into a more grace-centred, God-focused and joy-filled life in Christ.

## READING 1: SOME DON'T MAKE IT

### *orientate*

Jesus loved telling stories. He would take ordinary situations that people faced and turn them into illustrations (“parables”) of how God works. He told lots of stories about farming because many of the people were farmers and they would understand what he was saying. We’re looking at a farming story today – about a farmer sowing his crop by hand. You would think that Jesus told stories to help people understand what he was saying, but it was mainly the opposite. He mostly told stories so that only those who were interested in God and really thought about it would get it. He wasn’t looking for shallow followers. Most of the stories Jesus told we have to interpret for ourselves as best we can, but in today’s story, Jesus tells his disciples the meaning, so it’s crystal clear for us. Jesus is saying that some of his followers won’t make it.

### *explore*

#### **Luke 8:4-15**

4 While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 5 “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6 Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant. 10 He said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’

11 “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 12 Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. 14 The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

### *journal*

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What are the main reasons for people dropping out of Christian faith?

## reflect

It seems that Jesus is saying that there are at least three common circumstances in which people will walk away from Jesus.

For some it's when they first hear the good news about Jesus – they're like the "path." Maybe they never really get it or maybe it sounds too costly, but they walk away from Jesus before it sinks in. They never give Jesus a chance. Satan just whips the good news away and that's it. You probably have friends like that. They don't really have any interest in Jesus. Keep loving and praying for them (soil can change), but don't beat yourself up over it. They can't hear at the moment. That's not your fault.

The rocky soil people love the good news about Jesus and get really excited about it. They grow quickly and it looks like they'll be following Jesus forever. But the faith that develops so quickly dies just as quickly. When they face testing and following Jesus becomes a challenge, they drop out. They want all the benefits of being a Christian but won't accept the cost. They look for something easier.

The thorny soil people last longer. The seed takes root and begins to grow, but gradually the weeds begin to sprout as well. (As Jesus points out, the weeds are both our worries and pleasures – our disappointments and our successes - anything that takes our attention away from Jesus.)

Gradually their life with Jesus gets strangled and they fade away. They're just not following any more.

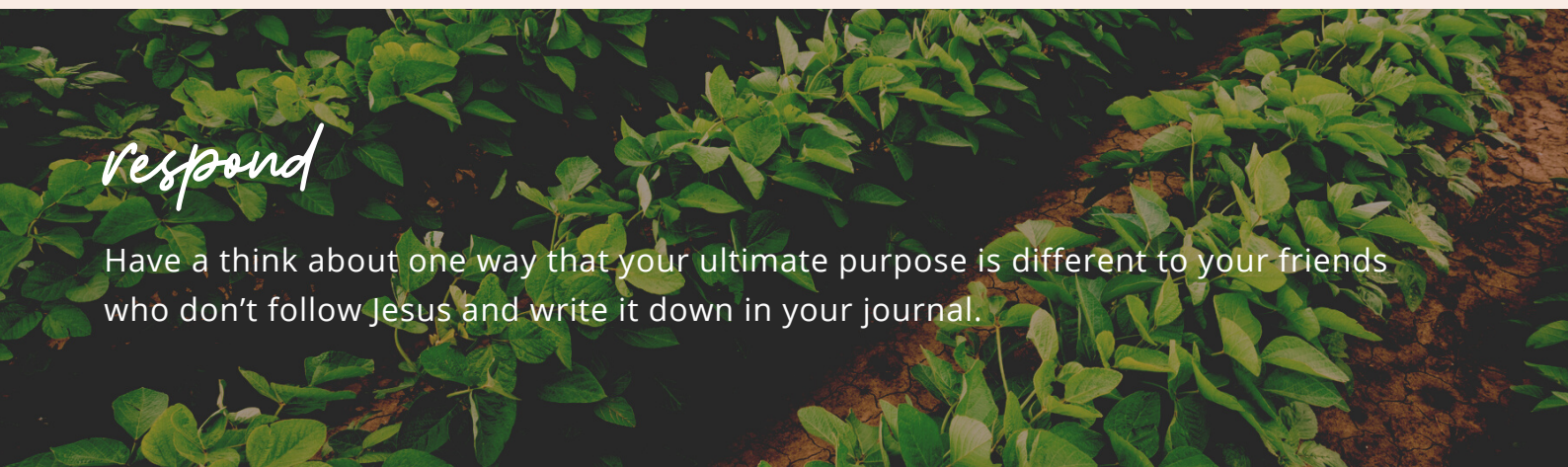
So sadly, some people don't make it. Lots of the big crowd following Jesus at this point weren't there two years later. As Jesus predicted, the growing seed just withered away. You need to be aware of this. Satan will put pressure on you. He hates your trust in Jesus and wants to strangle your faith. It could be through disappointments or worries or successes or hurt or failure. He'll try. But there is a lot of good soil that produces an incredible spiritual harvest. Note that Jesus doesn't describe these people as superstars but as having "noble and good hearts." Ordinary Christians who persevere to the end. They're the ones through whom God produces a great crop. Be one of them.

## pray

Lord thanks for treating me with grace. I want you to know that I'm following you all the way. I know there will be disappointments and testing and difficulties and challenges and temptations. But I'm good soil and I'm not going to wither or get strangled. Please help me to follow you to the end.

## respond

Have a think about one way that your ultimate purpose is different to your friends who don't follow Jesus and write it down in your journal.



## READING 2: GOD AND THE SEASONS OF LIFE

### *orientate*

There is something in us that expects that life should get better for us. Next year will be happier, more rewarding, more satisfying, more successful, more pleasurable, more peaceful than this year. Of course, this is not true. We experience changing seasons in our life journey, and some will be more enjoyable than others. Some seasons are fantastic and others are really tough. Someone who knew this well was King David. He was the most godly and successful Israelite king in the Bible. And yet he faced some very difficult and taxing seasons e.g. attacked by his benefactor, rejected by his kids and friends, dealing with the consequences of his own failure, struggling with health issues, overwhelmed by enemies. David certainly had his share of good and bad seasons as he followed God. Lots of things didn't work out well for him. Yet he retained his unshakeable faith in God. He knew God's presence and friendship through all the different seasons of his life. Let's read about David's experience in one of the most famous songs he wrote.

### *explore*

#### **Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right path for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

### *journal*

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. Which season is closest to yours at the moment?

## reflect

I can see at least three seasons of life in this song. First, there are the “**pasturelands**” (1-3). These are the ordinary and refreshing times in life when God is renewing and leading us. Nothing outstanding is happening but we know that God is present.

Second, there are the “**shadowlands**” (4). These are the dark, even tragic times when nothing seems to be going right and everything is tough.

Finally, there are the “**tablelands**” (5-6). Times of great victory and great celebration.

David experienced all of these seasons and plenty more. So will you. Seasons will change, often with little seeming rhyme or reason. At one point in the middle of a very exciting time in ministry, God said to me, “You will have seven good years and seven tough years.” I didn’t think a lot about it because things were going so well, but sure enough after seven years the season changed.

Personal life became challenging, ministry was difficult, and life generally felt disappointing.

I don’t think I’d done anything wrong. God just changed the season.

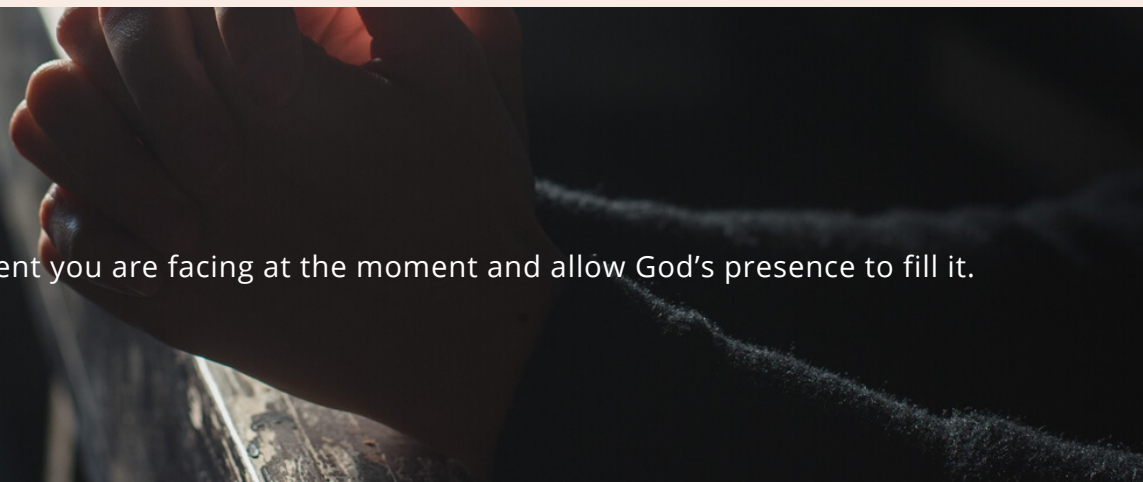
Like David, you will go through many different seasons in your life. Probably, most will be mundane but fine. Some will be extraordinary, and others will be extremely painful. This is God’s plan for you and me. What David emphasises in this song is that God is close and working in all your seasons. In the pasturelands, he’s guiding and caring for you. In the shadowlands, he’s comforting and protecting you. In the tablelands, he’s celebrating and partying with you. Your seasons will change and some will be very challenging for you. But remember God loves you deeply and is working for your good in all the seasons. Make sure you let him look after you, especially when life gets tough.

## pray

I love the good seasons Lord and I thank you that lots of tableland seasons lie ahead of me, especially when I’m with you forever. But I know that you allow me to go through tough seasons in this broken world. Please may I run to you and not away from you at these times. May my faith be strengthened and my relationship with you deepened. I need you in every season Lord.

## respond

Think of a disappointment you are facing at the moment and allow God’s presence to fill it.



## READING 3: I'M OVERWHELMED

### *orientate*

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul bares his soul. He openly talks about his struggles and suffering. It's not a pity party, just a deeply honest account of his journey in serving God and people. If you think that following Jesus should be all plain sailing, this is the book for you. Paul shares his fears and disappointments and battles along with his rock-solid faith that God is at work in and through his life in every circumstance. In today's reading, Paul describes a time when the pressure was so great that he reached rock bottom, thinking his life was finished. See what he says about his experience and its purpose.

### *explore*

#### **2 Corinthians 1:3-11**

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 5 For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

### *journal*

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What purpose does Paul find in his suffering?

## reflect

Paul was a real goer. He was courageous, determined, resilient and indomitable. An irate crowd could stone him half to death and the next day he would be up preaching again. You just couldn't hold him down. So when Paul says, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life," you know things must have been really awful. He doesn't tell us the exact circumstances, but even Paul was completely overwhelmed by the situation.

It's likely that you will face times in life that are so horrible/painful that you will feel completely overwhelmed. I'm not talking about facing a few disappointments. I mean when multiple struggles heap up on each other and you've got absolutely nothing left. It just feels that there is no point or possibility of going on. If this happens, you're not alone. This is where Paul found himself. Such an overwhelming situation is sometimes described as the "dark night of the soul." It's so black that it can even feel like God has abandoned us. These are crucial, turning points in our lives. As we suffer, we either hold more firmly onto God in absolute desperation or we abandon him in our pain and bitterness. It's a choice we make.

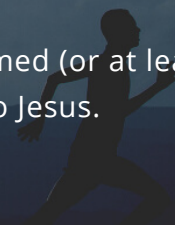
There is no doubt about the choice Paul made when he was overwhelmed. He threw himself onto God and relied on God to deliver. And he did deliver, and Paul knew that he would continue to do so (1:10). What a courageous and powerful call by Paul. But it is a call that you too will probably have to make at times if you are to persevere as a follower of Jesus and finish well. May God give you strength as you need it.

## pray

Father, thank you for forgiving me, for rescuing me from the path I was on, and for giving me a new life, hope and joy in you. Help me to continue to appreciate my faith story. Give me confidence to share my story and show me who to share my story with. Please give me the courage to try with someone who trusts me.

## respond

If possible, think of a time in your Christian life when you felt overwhelmed (or at least under significant pressure). Reflect and journal on what kept you holding on to Jesus.





## READING 4: TOUGHING IT OUT

### *orientate*

Growing up, I was small for my age. That was an advantage when I played rugby league in primary school because we were classified in weight divisions, so in year 6, I was playing against mostly big year 3 students. Things changed in high school when I played rugby union and we went to age divisions. I was playing against some very big boys. I got smashed when I tried to run, but I was a very good low tackler. So the coach would line me up against the biggest guy in the opposition backline and tell me to keep taking his legs out. It was dangerous work and didn't always turn out well for me. But I knew my role in the team and each game I put my body on the line. If I was worried about the cost or risk, I wouldn't have played football, I'd have chosen tennis. In today's verses, Paul tells Timothy to be ready to work hard and tough it out like a good footballer. Well Paul doesn't talk about football, but he uses similar illustrations.

### *explore*

#### **2 Timothy 2:1-7**

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. 3 Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.

5 Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. 6 The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. 7 Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

### *journal*

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. Which picture is of most help for you?

## reflect

I know that Christians are sometimes depicted as weak people who need to rely on a “god” because they can’t make it on their own. But the fact is, following Jesus is a huge challenge and comes at significant cost. Jesus described it as “taking up your cross” and we all know that’s going to be painful and demanding. Don’t get me wrong. As we have seen in these studies, there are lots of wonderful benefits in being a Christian. But an easy, carefree life is not one of them. No wonder Paul tells Timothy to “be strong” (1) or “toughen up.”

Following Jesus is like being a soldier (3-4). You just can’t do what you want. There is a war to be won and orders to obey. You don’t want to be distracted by nice stuff. You have to focus on your job and that means significant sacrifice at times. It’s not that we can’t enjoy ourselves, but having a good time is not our purpose for existence. We serve a higher and more significant cause. We’re good soldiers.

Following Jesus is like being an athlete (5). There’s a gold medal to be won, but you won’t get it by cutting corners or taking it easy.

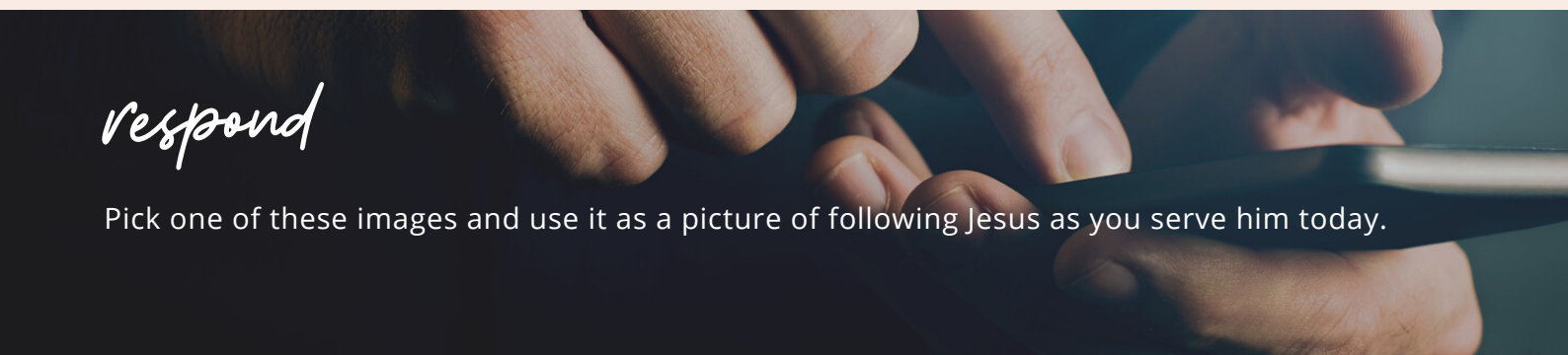
Some athletes try to cheat the system and win without the hard work. They lose everyone’s respect. Followers of Jesus are not like that. We recognise that God (as Lord) lays out what he wants us to do and we follow with all that we’ve got. We’re winning athletes. Following Jesus is like being a farmer (6). Living in the country for a few years, I learned how hard many farmers work. They keep ploughing and planting and fertilising and irrigating and weeding. They don’t give up. If the harvest doesn’t come that year, they start again. They know that in the end their hard work will pay off. It’s the same for followers of Jesus. While we don’t always see immediate fruit, we work hard and continue to serve, knowing that the crop is coming. We’re hardworking farmers. As these pictures show, a lot of the time following Jesus means gritting your teeth, making the sacrifices and choosing to serve Jesus and others though it costs. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” That’s not directly from the Bible but it’s what Paul is saying here.

## pray

I need a strong challenge every now and then Lord. Thanks for today. I don’t want to be a slack follower. I want to make a difference for you. I want to go the distance. I want to give it my best shot. I’m committed to being a good soldier, a winning athlete and a hardworking farmer. Please help me.

## respond

Pick one of these images and use it as a picture of following Jesus as you serve him today.



## READING 5: IT'S WORTH IT

### *orientate*

Well it's been a challenging journey this week. We've faced the significant sacrifice involved in following Jesus for a lifetime through the rewarding/enjoyable times and particularly through the painful/challenging times. We've seen that some don't make it. They pull up stumps when the going gets tough. But what happens if you do persevere and follow Jesus to the end of your life – what if you finish well with Jesus? I want to end with some really good news: it's all well and truly worth it. By the time the Apostle John records the vision that you will read today, he is a prisoner. He's outlived all his peers who have been martyred and he's writing to encourage Christians who are facing growing persecution from the Roman Empire. God gives this suffering leader a glimpse into the future and shows him how it will all end. And it's incredible.

### *explore*

#### **Revelation 21:1-7**

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”<sup>6</sup> He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

### *journal*

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What's the best thing about God's future plans?

## reflect

There are a couple of things you need to know to make sense out of this picture of your future. First, God has always planned for his people to live with bodies. In the future, you will not be a ghost roaming around. You will be a real person with a new real body. Now I'm not sure exactly what that body will be like, but I suspect it will be much like what we have now, except so much better – more beautiful, more powerful, more holy, more complete. We will be whole, real people with our God.

Second, you will note John sees a new heaven and earth (1). The separation between heaven (the place where God lives and rules and works) and earth (the place where we live and rule and work) will be gone. All the barriers will come down. We will be living and ruling and working together with our God. The new heaven/earth will have the best of earth (God's beautiful creation and new kingdom) and the best of heaven (God's glory and power and presence) all mixed into one. What a place! What a God!

While John describes some of the wonder of our future life (especially the intimacy of our relationship with God), it's hard to picture something that is beyond our wildest dreams. What he does note are some things that will be missing – no tears, no death, no mourning, no pain. All the struggles we have talked about this week will be gone. We'll be free. And best of all, our sin and brokenness will have vanished. No more struggling with temptation. No more guilt. No more wrong motives. Just a complete desire to love God and live closely with him and our Christian family. Forever.

All this is for those who make it to the end, who "are victorious" (7), who persevere. Of course, we don't earn such a wonderful life forever, it comes as a free gift because we are brothers and sisters of Jesus. God says to you (7): "You will inherit all this. And I will be your God and you will be my child." Finishing well will be worth it a million times over.

## pray

Jesus kept his eyes on the end (Heb. 12:2) and Paul did the same (Phil. 3:20-21). It was because Jesus and Paul knew what you were planning for their future Lord that they persevered through the tough times. Keep reminding me of what you have in store for me as a joint heir with Jesus. Thank you that your future plans for me are better than anything I could dream of, and that you are longing to share your life and kingdom with me forever.

## respond

Take some time to try to visualise the scene in today's passage. See God wiping away your tears, of calling you his child face to face, of pouring out living water for you. Imagine the beauty and worship and power of heaven and earth coming together with Jesus the hero and God the ruler.

# Discussion QUESTIONS

***Use these questions to discuss with a mentor or group what God has shown you in this study***

Reading 1: Some Don't Make It (Luke 8:4-15)

1. Any reflections or questions on Reading 1? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
2. Why do people fall away from Jesus? What may be the greatest danger for you?

Reading 2: God and Seasons in Life (Psalm 23)

3. Any reflections or questions on Reading 2? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
4. What season are you in at the moment? How is God working in you and for you in this season?

Reading 3: I'm Overwhelmed (2 Corinthians 1:3-11)

5. Any reflections or questions on Reading 3? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
6. Why does God allow us to suffer? What can we do when we go through very difficult times?

Reading 4: Toughing It Out (2 Timothy 2:1-7)

7. Any reflections or questions on Reading 4? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
8. Discuss the pictures of Christian life (soldier, athlete, farmer). What do they have in common? Which is most helpful for you?

Reading 5: It's Worth It (Revelation 21:1-7)

9. Any reflections or questions on Reading 5? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
10. How will your future life be different? What are you looking forward to most in the new heaven/earth?
11. What will "finishing well" look like for you? Are you confident of persevering in following Jesus?
12. How are you going spiritually and personally? What other things would you like to talk about?

