

## **HOLDING FAST**

### **The Book of Philippians #16**

I have a confession to make. I have a fear of heights. I wish I did not fear heights as there are plenty of views that I would love to behold but I can't get close enough to the edge to enjoy it. Perhaps some of you experience the same thing.

I don't know when yours started but I think my fear of heights began when my brother and I went to the Antioch County Fair back in the early fifties. My grandmother lived just a few short blocks from the fair so my parents gave us some money and we walked by ourselves to the fair and spent several hours there. We could do that back in the fifties. It was a safer time and everyone looked out for each other. We probably knew about eighty percent of the people at the fair, including some who ran the rides or manned the booths. Anyway my brother and I got on a ride called the Rock-O-Plane. Does anyone remember this ride?

It was sometimes nicknamed "the cages" because you sat in egg shaped cages. It was similar to that of a Ferris wheel but with seats that are enclosed and roll forward and backwards as the ride turns. If you rock hard enough the cage will flip upside-down and end-over-end. If you don't want this to happen there is usually a wheel inside that you can use to lock the cage and prevent it from rocking. But it can also be used to make the ride more intense by locking the seats at crucial points in the ride's revolution, causing the seats to flip upside down and spin erratically.

At that time I was fine with rides that went up in the air and around and around. So I was anxious to go on the ride with my brother. We were the first ones on so I was enjoying the ride all the way until it stopped at the top to let other kids get on. Now, an important part of this story is that my brother loved to tease me as a kid and he took advantage of this opportunity to do it again. It was at the point where we were at the top of the ride waiting for someone to get in the bottom cage that my brother decided to strike. He started rocking the cage as much far it would go. I tried holding on to that wheel to prevent it from rocking but my brother was determined to make it rock.

I don't know what he enjoyed more, the adventure of it or the panic he saw me experience as I looked at how far down the ground was and how high up we were. I started out feeling safe in that cage. But all that changed at the top as I soon felt threatened and out of control. Even today heights can bring back that same emotional response - queasy stomach, sweaty palms, weak knees and a little vertigo. They call these "body memories" where you physically recall a past experience, particularly traumatic ones. I still experience these body memories from time to time when I encounter heights or feel out of control.

Well it seemed to take forever for us to get to the bottom and all the way down I was in a panic and crying because my brother was having fun rocking the boat and I was terrified. So when the attendant saw me he asked if I wanted to get off the ride. I quickly said yes! So I got off and ran for the nearest exit to sit down and compose myself. This I believe is where my fear of heights started.

I have gone on other amusement park rides as an adult, even rollercoasters that turn upside down and sideways. But I have never wanted to be on another Ferris wheel type ride again. It did it a few times with my kids in enclosed cages that did not rock because it was something a dad should do. But I did not enjoy it. Whenever I could I let Wendy take them on those rides while I stayed on the ground. I got dizzy just watching them go up and down over and over again.

And then there was the time we visited the St. Louis Arch.

When we were kids my parents drove through St. Louis on our way to Chicago to see my father's uncle and aunt. It was around the summer of 1965 and the Arch was not yet completed. The sides were almost done but there was no top joining the two sides together.

Years later Wendy and I went back to St. Louis for a church music conference and while we were there decided to visit the completed arch and take a ride to the top. It was to be the fulfillment of my childhood dream. And what a difference the completion of the construction made. Not only was the arch complete but the area around it had been renovated and updated. It was truly a beautiful thing to see the arch standing tall and gleaming in the sun beside the river.

But seeing it was not enough. I decided I wanted to go to the top so I could tell my brother I had walked across the completed structure. What I did not know is that in order to get up to the top you had to sit in very narrow Ferris wheel type seat that rocked back and forth as it curved its way to the top. And it was enclosed in a dark and narrow passage that if you had a fear of closed-in spaces would have caused your claustrophobia to manifest itself.

I did not care too much for the ride up but I had Wendy by my side and there was no other way to the top. So I suppressed my fears and tried to enjoy the adventure. Once we got to the top I discovered that there weren't just little peep holes to look out. The entire top of the arch was made of glass. You could see for miles and miles. This was a blessing and an awesome adventure for most but for me it was a nightmare. Why I thought it might be enclosed I do not know, perhaps just wishful thinking to calm my childhood based Acrophobia.

In any event, once we were at the top we could not go back down the same way we came. We had to cross over that arch and get in another set of Ferris wheel seats in order to get back to the bottom. But I was determined to go to the edge of the glass even though I knew I could not possibly walk across it. Looking out over that wide-open expanse had already started my heart to racing.

But I am a creative person so I decided there was a way for me to do this. I could crawl on my sweaty hands and weak knees on the floor of the arch and at least touch the edge of that glass. So, caring more about completing the task than the embarrassment I would experience, I set out on my timid adventure and with shaking hands I touched the edge of that glass. Then I immediately crawled backwards to stand next to the safety of my wife once again. Oh, did I tell you that the arch was 630 feet tall and the wind was blowing and the Arch was swaying? Yeah. There wasn't enough drama with just the height. The wind had to add a little sway to the adventure.

Well anyway, after I completed my weak-kneed crawl I told Wendy that if she would hold my hand and walk me across I would close my eyes and be just fine. So that is what we did. She enjoyed the view while I enjoyed the security of her touch.

Two separate experiences yet strangely related. When I was in that Rock-O-Plane as a kid I wanted something to hold on to that would stop the swaying of the cage. But I was not in control. My brother was. And he would not let me hold on to the wheel to stop the spinning. Did I mention my brother loved to tease me?

Anyway, when I was at the top of the St. Louis Arch I also wanted something to hold on to that would

stop the spinning and the swaying. But I was still not in control. The Arch was meant to sway in the wind in order to keep the integrity of the structure. What was a safety feature for the Arch was a cause of panic for me. So I held on to the nearest thing that was trustworthy and sympathetic to me. I grabbed hold of my wife and together we made it over and down to solid ground.

Sometimes life spins out of control and we are caught in a cage of fear and panic that keeps turning and spinning until all we want to do is get off. But we can't until someone comes to our rescue and lets us off the ride. Other times we volunteer for something that starts out as an adventure but ends in panic because we did not expect the adventure to bring up so many past fears. Having a companion to hold our hand as we walk across the fears of life can have a calming effect on our fears. Sometimes we just need to close our eyes and ignore the fear in front of us in order to make it through. But that is only possible if we have someone to hold our hand and guide our steps.

Our adventure of faith can be like my Rock-O-Plane experience and the scaling of the St. Louis Arch was to me. It can start out as safe but can become somewhat disconcerting at times. A life of faith is not always what it appears. It is always an adventure but it is not always a safe adventure. There are places and moments in life that rock the foundation of our faith where we feel out of control and start to panic. And there are times when adversity causes our faith to lose its firmness as it starts to sway when the winds of doubt and fear blow against it.

In every age and in every season of life we all need something to hold fast to - something or someone that will guide us through the tempest and steer a straight course into the calm. God has provided parents, husbands and wives, children and friends as guides and companions in this life. But these are all temporary companions, as frail and powerless as we are against the storms of life which the enemy of our soul throws against us. Thank God for them, but they must look to the same place of strength that we do. They have to cling to the same foundation which holds on to us.

There is only one solid foundation upon which we can all hold fast. One rock which will not be moved when the winds of adversity blow and the cages of past fears come once again to rock our world. And what is this all-encompassing structure to which we must hold fast? It is the word of life.

In Philippians chapter 2 Paul tells us that we should be *"holding fast the word of life"*.

#### PHILIPPIANS 2:12-16

*"So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

*Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, **holding fast the word of life**, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain."*

After instructing us to work out our salvation and to do so without grumbling and complaining Paul gives us the glue that holds all this together and makes it possible – holding fast the word of life.

To "hold fast" means not only to have a good grip on something; it also means to pay close attention to it. And what we are to have a good grip on and pay close attention to is the word of life. The word

translated as “holding fast” in the NAS and other versions is translated as “holding out” in the NIV. The NIV translators believed Paul was referring to holding out the witness of their salvation through their refusal to grumble or dispute, thus being lights in the world. But when you look at how this same Greek word is translated in other places this does not make sense. In the four other places where this word is used it does not refer to holding something out but rather to hold fast, to stay centered, or to stay concentrated on something. So I believe “holding fast” is the better translation.

The Greek word translated as “word” is LOGOS. It means things spoken as well as written, but it primarily refers to the uttered words of God, His doctrines and teachings. The word translated as “life” refers not just to a physical existence, but to a spiritual existence whose source is God. When Paul then refers to the word of life he is referring to the supernatural life that belongs to God and is provided to believers through faith in Christ. And what exactly is this “Word of life”? John gives us the answer, and it is not a “what” but a “Who”.

#### JOHN 1:1-4

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, all things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”*

The word of life is Jesus Himself. John says that the life that is in Jesus is the “light of men” (John 1:4). Jesus said of Himself that He is the “bread of life” (John 6:35) and the “light of life” (John 8:12), and that He supplies the “water of life” (4:10), and speaks “spirit and life” through His words (John 6:63). Colossians also tells us that it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Christ.

#### COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

*“He is the image of the unseen God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.*

*He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. **For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,** and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of the cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”*

The word of life is certainly the written recorded word of God given to the apostles and prophets in order to point the way to life. It is the God-breathed word of God we call the Bible and it does indeed bring life to all who heed its message.

#### 2 TIMOTHY 3:16

*“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”*

#### 2 PETER 1:20-21

*“But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”*

What brings life to the words of God, His inspired Scriptures, is the Word of God made flesh. It is the Spirit of Jesus which breathes life into His words. When God spoke the words, *“Let there be light”* light appeared. There was life in his words and when He spoke something unseen came into being (Genesis 1:3). So it is with Scripture.

JEREMIAH 15:16

*“Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.”*

PROVERBS 4:20-22

*‘My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them and health to all their body.’*

These verses describe what the word of God does to us and for us – the word of God brings joy and delight to our hearts. The word of God is life to all those who find it and brings health to all their body. There are many other verses that describe the impact that the word of God has on us. But let me take just one portion of Scripture and tell you what it says about the word of God. These come from Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible. It is located in the exact middle of the book, between the Old and New Testaments.

The word of God is: It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Psalm 119:105). It gives understanding to the simple (Psalm 119:130). It is pure and it is truth (Psalm 119:140, 142). When His word is treasured or hidden in our heart, it helps us not to sin against him (Psalm 119:11) and the way to keep ourselves pure is by keeping it according to His word (Psalm 119:9).

There’s an old hymn which was one Wendy’s mother’s favorite. It is called “Wonderful Words of Life”. Here are some of the lyrics.

Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life  
Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life  
Words of life and beauty teach me faith and duty  
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life  
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life  
(Words and music by Philip P. Bliss. Public Domain)

The words of God are something to be treasured. They are words of life full of wonder and beauty. They teach us about faith and duty. God’s words are words of life to us.

In John 6:63 Jesus said,

John 6:63

*“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.”*

It is not enough to know the word. You must also believe the word of God. The words God has given to us through His spirit breathing into men are words of life. The Spirit inhabits these words and brings life to them. But they are of no effect if they are not believed. Jesus walked among men, God in human

flesh, displaying many miracles to back up His claim. But few believed His words. Those who did inherited eternal life; those who did not condemned themselves to eternal death.

There is life to be found in the word of God. There is life to be found in Jesus who is the Word made flesh. Jesus said:

JOHN 14:6

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*

JOHN 3:36

*"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."*

And John confirms this when he says,

1 JOHN 5:11-12

*"And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life."*

So we hold fast to the written word of God because it brings life and peace to us. But we also hold fast to Jesus, the Word made flesh, because He is the One who gives the Spirit who brings life to His word. It is this word to which we must hold fast.

All of us hold fast to something. All of us find something to cling to when the world spins out of control, when we lose our equilibrium. We all have the ability to fear and panic when we feel out of control. We all have moments of anxiety and worry about tomorrow and what it has in store for us. We have all experienced some type of loss, be it a job, a home, our health, or a loved one. And we will all experience death at some point in time. There is an uncertainty about tomorrow. But if we know the One who holds tomorrow then we know He will hold our hand through whatever life's journey brings.

The journey we are on is not a short one. It is a long journey from birth to death. We need something to cling to, to hold fast to in order to make it successfully from the rocky shores of this life to the sandy beaches of eternity. Some say that we Christians need a crutch, that our religion is our crutch; that we have to have something to lean on instead of being self-sufficient. To them I say, yes I do. I need something that will keep me upright, that will help me walk through this life without succumbing to it.

When I lean on my own strength it fails me. When I lean on the world it deceives me. But when I lean on Jesus, when I hold fast to Him, when I hold fast to the word of life, I find a friend who walks beside me, One who takes hold of my hand and guides me safely through the barrier reefs of life; One who picks me up when I fall and sets me firmly back on solid ground.

But I also respond to these critics by saying that Jesus is not my crutch because He is not a temporary object to use until I grow strong enough to walk without Him. He is the strength which allows me to walk. I cannot walk the journey of this life without Him. Nor do I want to. When I fail to cling to Him I fail to withstand the storms of life. When I hold fast to something temporary then I find an unreliable and flimsy shelter, shifting sand which quickly blows away as the hard times beat against it.

I do not know what tomorrow holds. I cannot even guess whether or not I will have the breath to wake up each morning. In this world we have tribulation. I cannot overcome the tribulations of world, but I

know Someone who can. So I hold fast to Him that I might come out safely on the other side of tribulation and trouble. For He alone has overcome the world. If I can just touch the hem of His garment and hold fast to it I know that I will find rest and healing for my soul. Scripture says,

MATTHEW 7:24-25

*“Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.”*

PSALM 18:2

*“The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”*

Clinging to the Rock of my salvation has a special meaning to me due to something that happened many years ago.

In our young married days Wendy and I loved to go camping with our friends. I remember one particular time before we had kids. I was in my early twenties and we decided to get into a river that was flowing pretty swiftly against some big rocks but was not so deep that you could not stand in most places. I walked into the river with my friends and had a great time standing in the middle with river rushing against me. It was a little over waist high as this point so I decided to drop down and let the water take me down the river for a while. We had done this many times in many different rivers and it was a lot of fun and I had always felt in control. So I decided once again to let the river take me down stream.

But this time the river was more in control than I was. The water was deeper farther down and the current was stronger. Several times I had a hard time keeping my head above water. I was getting concerned so I started to look for something to hold on to in order to stop my momentum. But there were only slick rocks covered with water. Each time I attempted to hold on to one my grip came loose and I went further down the river and away from my friends.

At one point I came to the understanding that if I did not find something to hold fast to I would probably lose my life. I was running out of air and running out of strength. I could not keep my head above water. The current was too strong for me. So I opened my eyes underwater in one last desperate attempt to find something to hold on. I spotted a rock to my left near the shore and made the decision that no matter how much it might hurt or how powerful the current was I was not going to grab hold of that rock as if my life depended on it, because I believe at that moment it did.

I kicked toward the rock and reached out my hands to grab hold of it with all my might. My hands slipped a little but my fingernails dug into the rock enough and I held fast to that rock with all my strength. My head was now above water and so pulled myself up onto that rock and lay there until I gained back my strength. I then walked back up the river to my where my friends were, grateful to be alive and much wiser in my knowledge of the wildness and unpredictability of the river.

If that rock had not been near to me, if my fingernails had not dug into the rock, if I had given into despair instead of deciding to fight for life, I may not be here today. And if that river had taken me into a watery grave my children and grandchildren would not be here either. Our decisions have a ripple effect on life. If we do not hold fast to the word of life, to the Rock of our salvation, then it not only

has an effect on us in our moment of decision, but it also has an impact on others, even future generations. We hold fast to the word of life so that we can endure the hardships of life and to ensure our own salvation through this genuine display of our faith. But we also hold fast for the sake of future generations. Hebrews chapter twelve reminds us that we have a great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us who held fast to the word of life and endured many hardships as a result. In order to join this group of witnesses Paul tells us that we must:

HEBREWS 12:1-2

*“...lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

By holding fast we run – an oxymoron to be sure, but nonetheless true. We let go of everything but we cling to the rock of our salvation; we hold fast to the word of life in order to run the race and finish strong.

At one point in His ministry Jesus spoke of His body being the bread of life and said that unless you ate His flesh and drank His blood you would have no life in yourself. Because of this many of his disciples withdrew and did not walk with Him anymore. It was then that He said to His disciples, *“You do not want to go away also, do you?”* And Peter replied for them all, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and come to know that You are the Holy One of God”* (John 6:53-69).

Like the twelve disciples, we hold fast to this Word, this Word who was with God and who is God and through whom everything came into being. And we cling to the words He spoke because they are spirit and life to us.

Life will occasionally spin out of control; we will lose our equilibrium and begin to panic at the sudden turn of events. But we have something to cling to, something to hold fast to - the Rock of our salvation. Who else but He has the words of eternal life? So we cling to His word. We hold fast to it so that we might eventually hear these words said to us: *“Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord”* (Matthew 25:21).

We will all cling to something in this life. Even Jesus held fast to the Father, doing only what He did and saying only what He heard the Father say. By holding fast to the word of life we fix our eyes on Jesus who is the author and perfecter of our faith. There is no better example of a clinger than Jesus who held fast to His Father. And there is no one better for us to cling to than Jesus – the Word of life made flesh. So, as the expression goes, “get a grip”. Hold fast to the word of life. And no matter what don’t let go. He has promised to bring you safely through this life, and there is no promise He has made that has not come true. He is trustworthy. Hold fast to Him, for He is the Word of life.