

Philippians - Lesson 2

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Philippians 1:12-26

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Bruce: Righteous and gracious Father, once again we assemble at Your feet and trust that Your Holy Spirit would descend upon us and feed us with Your word. We thank You for the rain outside which nurtures the soil. And Father, we pray that Your Spirit would nurture the soil of our lives and draw us closer to Yourself. May You be pleased by our response to teach us today, for Jesus' sake. And all the Brave Men said,

Men: Amen.

Bruce: Let's turn in your Bibles, please, to Philippians. We're in chapter 1, beginning at verse 12 through verse 26. I forgot my reading glasses. So Brian is going to read the Scripture for us.

Brian: *"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest, that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

"Yes, and I will rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard-pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and to be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again." This is the word of God.

Men: Thanks be to God.

Bruce: Thank you, sir. *We are not what we think we are, but what we think, we are. Secondly, character precedes conduct, because who we are determines what we do.*

Now do you notice the similarity between those two statements? They both have to do with our thinking. But what we think, we are, because who we are, what you think about yourself, determines what we do.

Now Paul in his letter to the Philippian church calls people *saints*. Remember what we talked about last week. A saint is somebody who has been set apart by God. We use that term incorrectly in our culture at ecclesiastical services because we say, "Oh, she or he is

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a saint.” That’s not the meaning of the word. The word means this. You’ve been set apart by God. And so I’m glad to be with the saints today, men. It’s a great joy for me to be with you.

Now let’s take a look at those two statements. We are not what we think we are. But what we think, we are. And the second one is this. Character precedes conduct, because who we are determines what we do. The idea there is about thinking.

In our passage today we want to discuss the thinking patterns of the apostle Paul. Richard Sibbs, the great Puritan writer, said this. *“Thoughts are the seeds of action.”* In other words, how do you think? Thinking determines what we do. Remember Paul in Romans 12. *“Do not be conformed to the system of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* Remember the card we gave you—think, act, feel? That’s what Paul is going to teach us today about his own life.

I want you to discover the things that Paul is teaching us about himself and how he thinks in his thought patterns. Charles Spurgeon said this. *“God will not live in the parlor of our hearts if we entertain the devil in the cellar of our thoughts.”* You see, the whole emphasis of this particular passage is about thinking. Are we thinking correctly? If you think right, you’re more likely to act right. And when you act right, you’re more likely to feel right.

Now Paul went through a radical transformation when he was confronted by the Lord Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, on the road to Damascus. You can read about that in Acts chapter 9. But do you remember his life before his conversion? He was the number one persecutor of the church. He was the number one enemy of the church. He was the one who took it upon himself to destroy the movement called Christianity.

But something happened to him when he met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. And the biggest thing that happened to him was that he changed his thought patterns. He began to think differently. Notice verse 21. *“For me to live is Christ.”* He began to have a different thought pattern.

He speaks to this as thinking differently. Let me give you some other passages from the apostle Paul. How about Philippians 4:8? He uses the word *think* again. *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”* He’s teaching us to think correctly. *“Think about these things.”*

We can look at Romans chapter 12 verse 3. *“Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment.”* Now that’s the greatest definition of a team player.

Participant: Amen.

Bruce: *“Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment.”* The idea of *sober judgment* means this. It means to think about where you fit in with the rest of the group. It’s really not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about us. Paul says, *“Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment.”* You see, he had a change in his attitude because he began to think differently.

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How about 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verse 20? "*Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.*" Be mature in your thinking. You see, Paul went through a radical change in his life and he began to think differently. And there is a lot we can learn from these verses about what Paul began to think about.

He began to think about three things. And I want you to see how he handles these things, because notice. How you manage something is based upon how you think about something. And so he's going to take us through three different things.

You see, what changed for the apostle Paul was *his view of God, his view of Christ*. Now your view of Christ will shape your thinking, men. What you think of the Lord Jesus Christ will shape your thinking in all areas of your life. And so Paul is going to take us through his own life, because his view of Christ shaped his thinking about three different areas of his life—*his circumstances, his critics, and his future*.

Now notice how he thinks about those three things, because remember this. *Our thinking precedes our actions*. Thoughts are the seed of our actions. If we're not thinking correctly, we'll not be acting correctly.

So let's go through this. Look at verses 12-14. Now remember that Paul is in prison. He wrote four prison letters known as the *prison epistles*—the books of Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon. Now notice what he says in 12-14. "*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having been confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*"

He's teaching about the providence of God. We don't understand too much about God's providence. The providence of God really means *what God permits in our lives for His glory*. What does He permit in our lives for His glory?

Now notice how Paul thinks about his imprisonment. He views this as something that is a gift to him, not a punishment for him. He's not concerned for himself; he's concerned for the children of God in the church of Philippi. In Ephesians 6:20 he says, "I'm an ambassador in chains."

Now he views himself in prison as an ambassador. Now you don't find him griping, complaining or moaning, or blaming somebody. And why is that? It's because he has a different thought pattern. He's thinking correctly. He's basically saying this. This is for the cause of Christ. And so therefore your response is based on how your view of Christ is involved in the situation.

Now I'm sure that the Philippian believers were very disruptive about this and concerned by the news that their leader was in jail. They understood that they were part of a movement of a gospel invasion into Europe. And how would they ask the question? "What happens now that Paul is gone? He's no longer here." To them I'm sure that it was a great mystery. What is God doing?

Have you ever asked yourself the question? What in the world is the Lord doing? What's God doing? Why am I in prison? They were saying, "Why is he in prison?" Paul wasn't asking the question, because he thought differently about it. But they were asking

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the question. Why is he in prison? They were thinking that this was a great setback for the cause of Christ.

But notice. Far from being a setback, Paul says, “I want you to know that God is at work for His glory.” That’s God’s providence.

He goes on to say that “*what has happened to me has served the cause of the gospel.*” Now how can that be? How can his imprisonment be a glory to God and develop the cause of the gospel?

Look at verse 12. It’s wrapped up in the word *served*. “*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.*” It’s the idea of a servant. God has used these circumstances to become a servant. Not the people—that is, people are not involved in this. It’s the circumstances that is the servant. That’s the providence of God, these circumstances.

A correlative verse would be Romans 8:28.

Transcriber’s Note: Romans 8:28. “*And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.*”

Bruce: In all things God works for His good, for His glory. You see, Paul is saying that it’s the circumstances that are serving. It’s not the people who are serving; it’s the circumstances in which I find myself.

Roland Bigham, a Puritan writer, says that “*there are no accidents in the life of a follower of Christ.*” Paul is teaching us and warning us about the providence of God. Now the key to our understanding this particular passage in the way that Paul is looking at it is this. It’s understanding the word *servant*. His circumstances have become his servant. When God has called these difficult circumstances in Paul’s life to become a servant to him. You see, these circumstances are not something that’s a punishment to Paul. He’s using them as a servant to himself. “Paul is saying, these circumstances are serving me.”

He does that in two ways. First of all, notice that the whole Praetorian guard became followers of Christ. Many of them became followers of Christ because Paul was in jail. He was in prison. So it served Paul’s presentation of the gospel.

Now they didn’t have meetings in those days. They didn’t have rallies in those days. They saw Paul’s character. They saw what kind of a man he was. They saw how he was responding to the situation. They began to see how he began to think. He was thinking that this was for the glory of God. He could rest and trust in God’s providence. So the Praetorian guard was impacted by that.

So the very first thing that these circumstances served was the cause for evangelism among the Praetorian guard. And we know from history that the gospel spread after these Praetorian guards came to Christ.

Now here’s how it worked. Paul was most likely chained to one of these Praetorian guards on his left side and his right side—ankle to ankle, wrist to wrist. Now what do you think he talked about? (*Laughter*) That’s an ideal situation for an evangelist; he’s got a captive audience. (*Laughter*) You see, it’s serving him! The situation is serving Paul! So what does Paul want to do? He wants to proclaim Christ. “All right. I’m going to strap two guys to your legs and to your wrists, and they can’t move. Go at it.” (*Laughter*)

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At that time Nero was Caesar, and he was the one who was going to stamp out Christianity. And he said he was going to stamp out Christianity by putting Paul in jail. Now that's from a worldly perspective. But from a providence of God perspective, here's what God was thinking. "Nero, I'm going to make you the chairman of the evangelism committee of the Roman Empire." (*Laughter*) "And the way you're going to do it is that you're going to lock Paul up in jail."

You see, this served Paul. This served the cause of Christ. Now you can't act that way, men, unless you think that way, because if you're not thinking about that, you're not going to act like that. You don't hear Paul griping. You don't hear him complaining. You don't hear him blaming anybody. He saying, "These circumstances are serving me, because what I really want to do is to proclaim the gospel. You're giving me the opportunity to do that in ways that I could not do it before." So that is another way that circumstances served Paul.

The second one is this. *When you remove somebody out of leadership, what happens to the people who are below him? They step to the plate or they bail out.* Notice what Paul says. "The brothers have become more bold to proclaim Christ." What happened is that the other thing that served Paul was that more people became involved in evangelism because he was the one who could not do it alone. People had to step up. The members of the body of Christ had to stand up and do the same thing.

So the second benefit to follow through these circumstances of serving Him was that the body of Christ was stepping up to the plate and becoming more bold in their proclamation of Christ. You see, Paul says that's the providence of God. These things are serving me. And so you don't hear him complaining. You hear him giving thanks and rejoicing.

You see, Paul would tell us this. There is not one circumstance in his life that God is not using for his service for the glory of God. And the same thing applies to us. God will use our circumstances, men, to serve us in the cause of Christ.

But we have to think right. If you're not thinking right, you're not going to act right. We'll be complainers, we'll be moaners, we'll be gripers. But if you understand God's providence, He will use circumstances in your life and in my life to enhance the cause of Christ. That's why we can rejoice. We think differently. We've got to think right before you act right. And when you act right you're going to feel right. Yes, Brian?

Brian: To piggyback on that, I'm having some trouble with our—

Transcriber's Note: The microphone had to be passed to Brian.

Brian: This is like the Phil Donahue Show. (*Laughter*)

Participant: Circumstances work for good.

Brian: Yeah, right. (*Laughter*)

Bruce: How is it serving you, Brian? (*Laughter*)

Brian: So we're having a real challenge with a couple of our kids, and they're down and they're frustrated. And one thing that I notice, to put an illustration to what you're saying, it hit me that when you think inwardly, when you dwell on yourself, that's when you get depressed. That's when you complain, because you look at everything else and you're in envy, and you're seeing what everyone else has and what you don't. Whereas, if

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you look to be that servant, if you look to others, you see where I can put my skills on display. How can I glorify God? And look at all I have, because I get to serve these others, because they have less than me. So it's where we dwell, on what we are thinking, that really determines how we're living out the day and whether we're complaining or glorifying God.

Bruce: Amen. Well said. It's how we think. You think before you act. Paul is giving us the example of his own life. He's saying this, men. "The circumstances in which I find myself right now in prison, God is providentially giving them to me as a servant to me. These circumstances are serving me. And as a result of serving me, the gospel spreads." You see, it's a wonderful attitude to have. But you've got to think that way, because if you don't, you're not going to act that way unless you think that way.

Now Satan may throw out roadblocks to us. But God will use these roadblocks as stepping stones. God has not abdicated His throne at all. He's in ultimate absolute control of everything, even the wrath of His own enemies. God is in control because of His providence.

Now men, I believe that this is the assurance that you and I need to have—to trust in God's providence that will help us to live when we consider our unpleasant circumstances. I'm sure that you all have unpleasant circumstances. And when we understand God's providence, as illustrated by the apostle Paul, we can have great hope and security.

Take a look at verse 16. It's another thing that will help us understand this. Would somebody read verse 16, please?

Participant: *"The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, but the latter out of love."* That's verse 17.

Bruce: That's a good verse. We'll come to it later.

Participant: *"The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains."*

Bruce: 16. *"The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel."* That's the phrase I want you to see—"put here for the defense of the gospel." That is a military term which means *stationed*. He was stationed in jail for the defense of the gospel.

Now men, you're going to have a different response if you look at your circumstances that way rather than if you look at yourself as a victim. He is stationed there as an assignment. Just like that military commander says, "Take that hill," the Lord is saying, "Go to jail. Go to prison. I'm in control. This is going to serve you well because of your heart's desire to preach the gospel." He was stationed there as an assignment.

Paul is saying this. "What has happened to me is unimportant. But what is important is that God would be glorified in my circumstances."

Participant: Amen.

Bruce: *"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment."* You see, it is not thinking about yourself. It's thinking of how I fit in with the big picture.

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I want to tell you about a group of men I met and had the privilege of counseling in 1973 and '74. They were the POWs who were released from the Hanoi Hilton. I was part of a group of a department in the Navy who was called to debrief these men to help them get oriented back into society.

I learned so much from these men. They'd given me permission to share some of their insights that I gained from them. I won't use their names just to protect their innocence and to respect their dignity. But here are some of the conversations we had.

And the point that I want you to get is this, men. *You've got to look at your circumstances.* Don't look at what's happening to you. Look at your circumstances. The Scripture says that they are there to serve you.

There were 331 POWs that we debriefed. I didn't spend time with all of them. But after all the counselors got together we came to one conclusion. We never heard any of those 331 men say this. "My goal is survival." None of them ever said that. All 331 said this. "My goal is group survival. We'll all get out or none of us will get out."

"Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment." I asked one of the Naval flier POWs, (unclear) I said, "Friend, what motivated you to stay alive so that you could achieve your goal of group survival?"

And do you know what his response was? "The man next door is what motivated me."

I said, "Please explain that."

He said, "I know this: that when I'm taken down to the torture chamber to be interrogated, how I respond to my torturer and how I respond to the interrogation is going to impact the guy right next door." *"Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment."* The man next door was what motivated him to bear under the circumstances.

I asked another flier that I knew. I said, "What was it that motivated you, that kept you going, seeking the goal to capture the prize of group survival?"

And he said this. "These men are my family. These men are my country. I have a family and I have a country, and I must not let them down." *"Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment."*

Now men, you're not going to respond like that unless you think like that. You've got to think right before you act right. And what Paul is modeling for us is this. In the midst of your circumstances, look at how these circumstances can serve you for the cause of Christ and the glory of God.

Now it takes maturity to do that. We are victors; we're not victims. But it all starts with how you think. Paul modeled for us how to think about circumstances. They were there for his benefit and for the glory of God. They served him well.

Next, *take a look at his critics*—verses 15-18. Now some people wanted to harm Paul by discrediting him, and they preached Christ out of rivalry to make him jealous.

Now Paul was not saying that truth is not important. That's not what he's saying. In fact, in chapter 3 verse 2 and other places, he refers to these Judaizers and these men who pervert the gospel as "dogs."

Transcriber's Note: Philippians 3:2. *"Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh."*

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Bruce: He's not talking about pets. He's talking about these roving raging animals that went through the cities, choking up and eating garbage. I'll get to that in chapter 3.

So he is not saying that truth is not important. But what he was saying is this. What happens to me is not important. What happens to me does not matter. The issue is the glory of God. It doesn't matter what happens to me; that's okay. the issue is that it's not about me. It's about something bigger than myself. And that's who and what I represent. I'm an ambassador in chains for the cause of Christ. It's not about me. *"Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment."* Where do I fit in with the rest of the group?

So Paul was saying this in the midst of his critics. What happens to him is not the issue. The issue is the glory of God, not the well-being of Paul.

And then in verses 19-26 we see *his future*. We've seen how he thinks about his circumstances. We see how he thinks about his critics. And now we think about how he thinks about his future.

Now there was the possibility that he might very likely die in his current situation in prison. The people of Philippi might say, "What if Paul dies? What do we do?" But he also considers that God has not been finished with him and those of his ministry. Notice that in verses 22 and 24.

Paul describes two possibilities. He says, "I might stay alive. If that's the case, that would be wonderful, because I can proclaim Christ and I can teach you more and I can help you grow in grace. And that honors Christ. That would be wonderful! The other option is that the Lord might take me home, and that would be the best."

So he has two options. He refers to the good news and he refers to the best news. "The good news is that He might let me live. Then I can continue the ministry of the church in Philippi and spread the gospel." That's good news, really good news. Paul says, "I'd really welcome that."

And he also says that the best news is this. "The Lord might take me home to be with the Lord. He might take me home to be with Himself. I'd be in the presence of Christ."

So he views himself with two options. One is good and the other is the best. The good is to stay and serve the cause of Christ by serving them. That would be good. The best is to go to be with the Lord.

Now that's an apostolic conviction because of single-mindedness. Now go back to verse 21. This is the single-mindedness that Paul had. *"For me to live is Christ."* Six monosyllables. That's a description of the apostle Paul. *"For me to live is Christ."* That's how he views his circumstances. That's how he views his critics. And that's how he views his own future.

Now is that the conviction that we have?--for me to live is Christ? Let me tell you something. If we could think like that, we would act totally differently than we do, if we had that single-mindedness. So many of us are double-minded. We've got so many things going on in our lives at once—work, family, retirement, health, whatever it may be.

The thing that made Paul so powerful is this. He had a single mindset. *"For me to live is Christ."* And that translated into his circumstances. It translated into his critics. And now it translates into his future.

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And as a result of that, do you know the people I feel sorry for in this story? His captors. They can't win. If they let Paul live, what is he going to do?

Participant: Continue to preach the gospel.

Bruce: Continue to preach. They lose! And if they kill him, what happens? They lose! Paul goes to be with the Lord. The people I feel sorry for are these captors. They just can't win! They can't resist the providence of God. They don't know about that. They can't win in any circumstance. You see, Paul was not the one who was captive. He was the captor, not the captive, because of the providence of God. They just can't win.

Now I believe that his heaven-on-earth experience was really helping others grow in grace. And while he longed to be with Christ, he eagerly desired to remain to help the believers grow in the body of Christ.

"For me to live is Christ." That meant this. Paul knew that his body was not his own. His body was not his own. *"For me to live is Christ."* He knew that his future was not his own. *"For me to live is Christ."* His reputation was not his own.

By contrast, when you and I put ourselves first, it always brings misery. Putting ourselves first always brings misery.

Look at verse 19. this is the thing that I appreciate about Paul. Look at verse 19. *"Yes, and I will rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ that this will turn out for my deliverance."*

Now what do you see there? Well, you've just seen a man who went through an experience on the Damascus road that radically changed his thinking patterns. It changed his view about Christ. And men, may you and I have the correct view about Christ. If we're going to have the right actions, we'll glorify Christ. But you've got to think that way. Paul said, *"For me to live is Christ."*

Now verse 19 says this. You see his vulnerability. He's no he-man. He's no Atlas. He's no strong man. He's no all-pro. He's basically saying, "I know that your prayers are going to help me in my deliverance." He's showing his vulnerability. And I would call that *victorious vulnerability*, because he's a victor but he's vulnerable. He's asking that people would help him. And yet he exercises tremendous strength, as we've seen in his view of his circumstances, as we've seen in his view of his critics, and that we've seen in his view of his future. But at the same time he's vulnerable! He's opening up to the body of Christ.

And men, we're not heroes. We're not people who have status in the Olympics, hoping to get our medals because we're good Christian people. That's not what we're about. We need to be vulnerable with each other, to depend upon each other. We were not designed to live the Christian life alone. We're designed to live that in fellowship with each other. There's nothing wrong with being vulnerable because when you're vulnerable, you're victorious. That's what Paul is saying. "I know that when I'm vulnerable with you and I ask you to pray for me, I know that it's going to cause my deliverance." He's going to be the victor because he's vulnerable to allow people to be a part of his life.

Men, don't ever think in this message today that Paul was saying that you've got to stand like this and be the number one guy. He's not saying that. He's saying, "Trust the

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providence of God. I can trust Him in my circumstances. I can trust Him in my dealing with my critics. I can trust Him in my future.”

The important thing is this. Are you thinking right? And his view of Christ shapes his responses to those three situations in his life. And that will be the same for us. When we have the right view of Christ, we’ll have the right response for Christ.

Let’s pray. Father, it is with a great sense of gratitude that we study the life of Paul, Your servant—our mentor, our friend, our brother in Christ. Thank You for the things that He has taught us about how to think correctly about our circumstances and trust the providence of God, how to deal with our critics, and to realize that it’s not about us and what they say about us. It’s about what they say about You and the glory of Christ. And thank You, Father, for Paul’s example of our future. The world cannot win. We have an opportunity while we are still alive to proclaim the gospel of Christ. What a great joy that is, to minister to the world. If the Lord takes us home, Father, what a great joy it will be to be with You! The world system cannot win because You are the Victor, and we are not the victims. Father, just help us to realize the need for us to be vulnerable to each other, to trust each other, to not live our lives by ourselves like an island, but to depend upon one another in the body of Christ, as each of us will help one another’s deliverance from the system of this world. Grant this all for Jesus’ sake, Father. Won’t you be pleased to embed these truths in our lives? And may they be reflected in the way that we go about our lives, living out our conduct. We are not what we think we are, but what we are is who we are in Christ. May it be so for Jesus’ sake that You be glorified by us in our humble attitudes of obedience, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Men: Amen. (*Applause*)

Bruce: One other thing. I forgot my conclusion. (*Laughter*) Here’s my conclusion, to summarize all of this. This is pretty good, so I need to give it to you. (*Laughter*)

Paul’s life can be summed up in these verses in three phrases. In verse 13 it’s *for Christ*. In verse 16 it’s *for the gospel*. And in verse 25 it’s *for you*. For Christ, for the gospel, and for you. May that be our call in going forward the next year. Thank you much. (*Applause*)