

Articles by Paul E. Little

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The Effective Ambassador

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. [Suppose] you had been on the coast, either one—West or East—or anywhere for that matter, swimming at the seashore and suddenly found yourself knocked down by the waves, and suddenly you're in trouble. Do you remember how that happens—a big wave comes and knocks you down, and you go in over your head? You begin to flail and thrash around and gasp for breath and you're afraid and everything is out of perspective. There isn't a great deal that matters to you at that particular point—in terms of world politics or the economy or anything else—except getting your feet and getting your breath back again. Sometimes it happens very suddenly, unexpectedly. Other times it's sort of a gradual thing, and you're overtaken without your realizing what's happened. You know, life is like that. Sometimes we're going along and suddenly we're knocked down in the surf of life by some circumstance that is totally unexpected. And we begin spiritually to flail around: everything is out of focus, we're gasping for breath, we don't understand, we're panicked. A great deal doesn't matter to us that ordinarily does. Sometimes we get knocked down like that gradually, sometimes very suddenly. It may be some tragedy. It may be a physical illness that hits us overnight (and none of us knows whenever that may happen). It may be that we flunk an exam; it may be that there's a relationship that breaks up; it may be that we

have family troubles (difficulty with children or in our marriage); it may be that our finances are in very difficult shape and what we anticipated we could do, we couldn't do. It could be any one of a hundred things that we flail around. It may be that there are some of us here this morning and some of us who are listening who are in that situation in life at this very moment. If you're not in that situation at the moment, be thankful for it, but the time will sooner or later come when the surf of life will knock you down, and the important thing is to try to find out how we can regain our footing and regain our spiritual breath. The only sure footing we have in the Word of God is related to God himself: the awareness of and the confidence of the providential sovereignty of God. It's the theme that runs through the whole of Scripture—through the Old Testament and into the New Testament—the fact that God our Creator has a loving purpose of good for each of us, and that nothing happens in your life and mine by accident. I would suggest this morning—and I want to elaborate on this theme from the Word of God—that that's the only way to get our feet back on terra firma; that's the only way to catch our spiritual breath with the swirling surf all around us in life. But as we lay hold of that, we regain confidence and comfort and peace and joy. There is no other way. This is a theme that runs, as I say, from Genesis to Revelation. Joseph knew it. You remember the story of Joseph—literally sold down the river by his brothers. He was in all kinds of difficulty for standing for righteousness' sake and so on. He had every reason for bitterness (legitimately!) and for all kinds of hostility, but in that classic statement in Genesis 50:20 when his brothers finally are discovering who he is and they fear for their lives, he says to them not to worry. He says,

“You meant it to me for evil, but God meant it for me for good.” And all during those years that was the anchor that held Joseph. That was the sure ground that he had in the swirling surf of life. We find it reflected in Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. In Daniel 3:17-18, you remember, it’s put to them (right to the wall, literally) by Nebuchadnezzar as to whether they’re going to bow down and worship, and the alternative is the fiery furnace. And they say to him, “Look, we don’t know what God’s plan is, but we believe in his providential sovereignty.” They didn’t put it in those words, but that’s obviously what was behind what they said. And they said, “If God delivers us, fine. If he doesn’t, that’s fine. But in any case, we’re not bowing down, so go ahead and do what you please.” That’s what kept them in that situation. And then there was David—David, who was God’s anointed but who was having a terrible time because Saul was out to kill him. And David had a lot of friends who wanted to help God out. Numbers of them said, “We’ll take care of him for you. You don’t even have to get your hands dirty. The blood won’t be on your hands.” Joab at one point said, “Look, just one throw of the spear and that’s it, and we’ll take care of the whole thing.” And he no doubt gave very plausible reasons to David (since David had already been anointed) why this might be appropriate. But David, knowing God’s providence and his care and his love, says in 1 Samuel 26:11, “God forbid that I should touch the Lord’s anointed.” And David didn’t try to do God’s work for him, even though there was a lot about it that must have been swirling surf. This morning I’d like to think with you about how this principle operated in Paul’s life and to see something of its implications for us personally, because the beauty and the power and the

strength of the Word of God is that these things were written for our example, upon whom the end of the ages have come. And all of these things can minister strength and grace and power and love to us. And that's why the Bible is a living book, and applicable at every time in history and in every culture and in every situation. And the passage and incident from which I'd like us to think this thing through is Paul's letter to the Philippians 1:12-26, realizing that Paul here is writing from an imprisonment. He's not writing from the local Holiday Inn; he is chained to a Roman soldier on a rotating basis. You think you've got problems with your roommate? Imagine if he was chained to you and you couldn't get away, and there was a rotation. Imagine what that would do to you—not just after two days, but after two weeks, two months. This is the situation Paul is writing from. Realize that as we read verses 12-26. Paul writes to the Philippians and says: I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it becomes known throughout the whole Praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God 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 partisanship, 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 shall 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 shall 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 it is to be life 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 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 shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in your faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. Paul is amazing. He was able in that situation to see the providential, loving sovereignty of God in his past, in his present and in his future, which was completely unknown. Imagine all that went into that statement, that amazing statement in verse 12: I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. Do you remember everything that had preceded this? This whole incident really began when Paul was falsely accused in Jerusalem in Acts 21:29. He was sent to jail on what we would call a “bum rap” today. He was accused by the Jews of taking a Gentile into the temple because they had seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him. That was not the case, but nevertheless there was such an uproar he was put into what we call today “protective custody.” He was then held for two years. We’ve got problems today in our prisons with people who are unable to make bail, who languish in Cook County Jail here and in other prisons across the country for months and months and months without having come to trial, even though they may ultimately be declared

innocent. That was Paul's problem for two years. He was kept also by two people, one of whom thought he was going to get some money: Felix, according to Acts 24:26. (That's not an unknown problem in our time either.) And the other one who took over from him, Festus, according to Acts 24:27 held him for political reasons because he wanted to appease the Jews. And so Paul, unjustly put in prison in the first place and then held wrongly for financial and political reasons, ultimately appeals to Caesar because they decide they're going to send him back from Caesarea, where they sent him for protective custody, to Jerusalem. And he knew that was a hanging jury, so he said, "Nothing doing. I'm a Roman citizen." He appealed to Caesar. And then on the way, he's almost shipwrecked. You read Acts 27 and all that was involved in that—nobody would listen to him, the ship almost went down, they finally got with it and listened to him. God gave him a vision, and Paul said, "I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me" [v.25]. And then he comes to Rome, and here he is in jail, originally (probably) in prison and later under his own lodging, but chained on a rotating basis to this prisoner [sic], awaiting trial under an uncertain, corrupt King Nero. [It] certainly didn't give you a great deal of confidence in the system when you think about Nero and all that went on under that whole set-up. And it's out of that context that Paul says, "I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." Paul saw the hand of God in his past and he saw that nothing had happened to him by accident and that God had a purpose in it. I wonder this morning if you have recognized that fact about your past? Everyone of us has things in our past that we wonder about—things in our past that we think if we had been doing it we

might do differently. But it's God who has brought us through the past, and we need to recognize that. God is the one who put you in the family you're in. He's the one who has given you the abilities you have and the disabilities you have. He is the one who has allowed struggles of various kinds to come into your life, be they relational (in family or marriage or with roommates or friends), financial, academic or physical. He has been the one who has allowed this, and he has been at work uniquely in your life. Do you ever thank God for his providential, sovereign, loving care in your life and all that has gone into it at this point? This is what kept Paul going and kept him from being overwhelmed in the surf of life. Or are you, by any chance, consumed with second-guessing? "If only I had said this or done that, or somebody hadn't done this or done that, the whole thing might have been different." Do you ever drive yourself wild with second-guessing in life? It's a futile experience and one that as Christians we needn't go through and shouldn't go through, because it indicates a lack of trust. Are we fighting against our background? Do you wish you were somebody else other than what you are, or do you wish you were doing something else other than what you're doing? You may find yourself fighting against God if you fail to realize, as Paul did here, that the whole of your past has had the hand of God in it, and it's useless to be worried about the past. God is concerned about the present and our relationship with him from here on in—even with failure in the past. You didn't take God by surprise when that happened, and God loves you and me, and he has a purpose for good in all of the providential, sovereign working of his will in all of the details of our lives that have brought us to this very moment. Paul, despite everything that could have

made him bitter and frustrated, says in the light of that astonishing background, “I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” I want us to see very clearly this morning that accepting the providential sovereignty of God as a basic principle of life in which we can rejoice and be thankful does not mean that we are totally passive. It does not mean acceptance of what the Muslims call *kismet*—the blind, inexorable outworking of faith. It does not mean that we have no freedom, but it does mean that our God is a loving Father and that he works in our lives for good. We are to be active where that is required, but we are to accept that which we cannot control as coming from the hand of God. Notice that Paul is very active even though obviously this principle has worked itself into the marrow of his bones, and that’s why he was able to respond and write like this from Rome. Paul acted where he could. Do you remember when he was thrown into prison in Philippi? Again, falsely accused. Paul and Silas sang at midnight, the jailer was converted, and boy—they had a great time, you know? And then when the magistrate discovered [Paul] was a Roman citizen they were really shaken, and they said, “Oh, we’re very sorry. We made a bad mistake, you know. Please pardon us. Feel free to slip out of town. Goodbye!” And as you read through Acts 16:37ff., you find that Paul says, “Nothing doing. You’ve violated my rights as a Roman citizen. You come down here personally and get us out of jail and escort us out of town,” because Paul wanted it clear to them and everybody else in the Roman Empire that it was not against the law to preach the gospel. Paul didn’t just sort of say, “Oh, well—OK, we’ll just sort of accept that, you know, and we’ll sneak out of town, and maybe we

can get out before dawn,” and so forth and so on. He made a scene, if you like, for the glory of God. He accepted the fact that he was in jail, he and Silas sang, there was somebody converted, there was great blessing; but he was very active because he knew what the law was and that it had been violated. And he always had in mind the furtherance of the gospel. Likewise, in Acts 25, when they wanted to send him down to a hanging jury, from Caesarea to Jerusalem, Paul knew that that was not right, and so he exercised his right and appealed to Caesar. He didn’t just say, “Well, whatever happens I take as God’s will.” He wasn’t totally passive. There were things over which he had some control and for which he took responsibility. And I want us to be very clear this morning that realizing this tremendous truth of the providential sovereignty of God doesn’t mean that we are passive in life. And likewise, when you read the account of the shipwreck in Acts 27:31ff., Paul didn’t just say, “Well, I wonder how that’s all going to turn out. Let’s just sort of see how things are.” He practically took command of the ship, and he gave them instructions as to what to do and how to operate. And they survived. He acted when he could to change the situation. But when he couldn’t change things, he accepted them. Now that’s exactly, I think, the principle that should apply to us in our lives. There may be things in your life right now that you’re expecting God to do that he’s never promised to do. He wants you to move and change them. There may be temptations you’re facing and you think, Well, I wonder why God allows this. You know, “Lord, get me out of it.” And the Lord may be saying to you, “Look, you’re the one who walks right into the jaws of the temptation. You’re the one who’s responsible with the strength that I give you to avoid them.” First Corinthians

10:13 says: No temptation has taken us but such as is common to man, but God is faithful who will with the temptation always provide the way of escape, and he will not allow us to be tempted above what we are able. But that's the kind of thing that takes us unawares—some of us. We walk into relationships, we walk into situations, which we know are going to send us down the tube. And then we say, "God, why don't you do something?" God has never promised to do that, and we are to be active in overcoming. Some of us are seeking guidance. I hope you're seeking it actively and not just saying, "Well, Lord, I'm waiting for the writing on the ceiling." Get all the information you can about all kinds of things. Tell the Lord every day that you're prepared to do or to go anywhere or do anything that he wants you to do to get all the information you can, because it's information and contact—this kind of thing—that God often uses as he brings to your mind the principles of the Word of God and relates them to the information that you have. Don't just be totally passive and wait for some kind of "liver shiver" that will be some divine "spiritual morse code" that will give you guidance in the situations of life. God will lead and direct, but he expects you to be active. [Take] the whole question of a job and money (finances), interpersonal relationships—"Lord, please, why can't you solve the problems we've got in our marriage or with our children or between people that I know"—and so forth and so on. Somebody at work, maybe. God may be saying to you, "Look, I'm working in your life. I've allowed these things to happen for a purpose; it hasn't happened by accident. But I expect you to do something. You're the one who should take an initiative and ask forgiveness. You're the one who should forgive unilaterally, if necessary (if you've been

wronged), even apart from the other person, and through you I will minister love and grace and power.” It may be that God wants us to take action in some area of life to get us out of the surf, in addition to realizing that nothing has happened in our lives by accident. Paul, then, saw the tremendous truth of the loving, providential sovereignty of God in the whole of his life and the paths at the time he was writing. But that did not cause him to be passive about the situations of life in which he had some responsibility and was able to do something. And the same can be true of us. Thank God for your past this morning, if you never have, and realize that all of it has come from the hand of God with the purpose of love. But then, Paul saw the providential sovereignty of God in his present situation as well, and he says in verse 13 [and following], “The way that this thing has really advanced the gospel is that it has become known throughout the whole Praetorian guard and to all of the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ, and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.” Paul was amazing. He never missed opportunities. He didn’t throw up his hands and say, “Well, what can I do in this kind of situation? I’ve got a very limited audience.” He realized that God had a purpose in this. And you can almost picture the situation as various guards would come and literally get plugged into Paul—chained to him—how, after a period of time, Paul would get talking with them and would say, “By the way, are you interested in spiritual things?” And obviously they would get the message. Undoubtedly, many came to Paul with great curiosity because they had heard of who he was, and the thing that was amazing about this man was that he

wasn't in jail for insurrection or for stealing or for murder. He was there for religious reasons, and this was an amazing thing to them. And no doubt his faith was notorious and famous. People apparently were allowed to come and visit Paul, and he no doubt talked to them and taught them the Scripture, and the guards were listening to this whole thing. And often, you know, there's a bank shot that way. You may not be able to speak to somebody directly, but in the third person you can often see flapping ears and people drinking up everything you're saying, even though you're directing it to another person. No doubt all of that was part of Paul's approach and ministry here. And the fact of the matter was that through this crack Roman legion of ten thousand people, the Word of God had spread, and Paul says it's not only the Praetorian guards but all the rest. Tradition has it that this Praetorian guard, as it was a crack unit, was shifted throughout the whole Roman Empire and that the gospel was first brought to Great Britain through men who were converted in this Praetorian guard—possibly through the life and witness of Paul. And [Paul] said, "The second thing is the brethren have gained confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment." It's amazing. Rather than being an occasion for giving up the ghost (because they were looking for the great apostle Paul to come and do all the work), Paul's example, number one, was a real encouragement to the believers, no doubt in the way that he was praising God for all of his providential, sovereign care. And also these brethren no doubt came to the realization that their trust had to be in God rather than in Paul. Whenever you have special meetings in your church, or you go into any kind of Christian activity like that, where is your trust and confidence? Is it

inherently in the people involved whom you invite, no doubt after great prayer, or is ultimately your confidence in God himself, that he will do something? If it's in people, you'll be in difficulty. In a situation like this, it's not possible for the one to whom we're looking to be there. And you'll be disappointed very often because people in whom you have confidence sometimes don't come through. But if your confidence is in God you won't be disappointed, even though there may be all kinds of changes in the situation. One of the great comforts to me personally, both in running conferences and also when I am invited to speak at a conference, is that God, if he has to, will speak through Balaam's ass. And I often feel, I must say, very much like Balaam's equestrian friend when I stand up to speak—when I am trusting God that over and beyond that, he will speak in power. And so these brethren gained confidence. And this was in the prison. Do you see in your own life this morning that God can and will do something through you uniquely if you're willing to make yourself available to him? Or do you think primarily in terms of your being a set-up for other people that God will work through? Now very often we're in a situation—I've been in it many times—in which we're arranging things for others to come, through whom God will minister. But God will also work through you personally in situations if you will allow him to do it. Paul saw the working of God in his present situation; he saw that the Word of God, the gospel, had become known to the whole Praetorian guard (with all of the implications of that), and he saw and was encouraged by the way the brethren took confidence in the Lord (rather than in Paul) and actively communicated the gospel. Have you recognized the providential sovereignty of God in your immediate

circumstances? Maybe you're going through something right now that is really bothering you. You don't understand. You don't see quite how it all fits together. You're heading down one road and there are blocks in that road, and God seems to be doing and saying something else. Take courage and heart: ask God to show you what he's doing in your life in the immediate present. Maybe there are dimensions of blessing that you have overlooked, but even if you can't see them as clearly as Paul saw them here, realize that in the light of the whole of the Word of God and all of God's revelation to us in his Word and in the face of Jesus Christ that he is working in your present situation. And if you are willing to allow him to do it, he will work in and through you. Now let me make a couple of observations as to why it was that Paul was used of God, even in prison or when he was restricted like this, and we may get a clue in our own situation as to how—though our situation and circumstances may be quite adverse at the moment—God may nevertheless work in and through our lives for blessing. In the first place, Paul wasn't wallowing in self pity. He wasn't saying, "Why me?" You know, Paul would have had all kinds of possibilities—here's the great apostle, the man who had a great public ministry, and God allows him to get stuck in a situation where he's sent to one other person and allows this to go on month after month after month. And you can imagine Paul thinking in that situation, "Lord, you know, I had such a great ministry going, you know, and I had such visions for public meetings here in Rome, and I want to get over to Spain, and all this. And Lord, look at this! Look at this guy that's plugged into me here. How can I—talk about a ball and chain!—how can I possibly have any kind of a significant ministry in this kind of situation?" Paul didn't

wallow in self-pity, saying, “Why me? Why couldn’t it be somebody else?” He took it as from God and made the best of it. Paul, in the second place, didn’t think God had forgotten him. Do you ever think that? Maybe you’re going through that now and wondering, Well, I wonder if the Lord really knows my situation and my problem. It’s that feeling that God has deserted us. It can really bother us in a prison situation. Paul didn’t feel that. He knew that God knew all about him, and as a matter of fact, he took his current situation as the appointment of God. In verse 16 he says, “They know,” and they must have gotten it from him, “that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.” Paul says, “Not only did it not happen by accident, but it’s part of [God’s] design that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.” And he was not at all feeling that God had forgotten him. Do you feel God has forgotten you? Remind yourself this morning, as our Lord says in Matthew 10, the very hairs of your head are numbered. He knows all about the decision you’ve got to make in a couple of days; he knows the agony of heart through which you’re going, if that’s your situation. He knows all about it and he hasn’t made a mistake. He’s set you in situations for a particular purpose. The third reason that Paul was used of God is to be part of the “now” generation. You know, we hear a lot about the “now” generation. And Paul, in verse 20, says, “It is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body.” You know, Paul could have said, “Well, Lord, I guess this prison experience is sort of going to be an interlude in my ministry and I can sort of coast here and forget the whole thing.” By no means! Paul realized that God’s will, as I’ve said on other occasions, is not some package out

in the future that we blindly grope after, having felt like it was let down out of heaven on a string. It is more like a scroll that unrolls every day. And God had a will and a plan and a purpose for Paul today and tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. And God has a plan and purpose for you today. The only day that you and I have to live for Jesus Christ is today. I hope particularly those of you who are students aren't sort of putting that projection off—"when I get out." All kinds of things: "I'm going to live the Christian life and have a quiet time and be nice to my family and friends and so forth and so on, but right now I'm just caught in the rat race of survival and getting through." Don't kid yourself! The Christian life is not some great, successful exploit out in the future. It's merely the succession of an accumulation of successful days of living for Jesus Christ. And it's only what you and I put into today for Jesus Christ that will determine the quality content of our Christian lives. It's not some great amorphous blob, as I've said, out in the future. Paul was part of the "now" generation. He didn't wallow in self pity. He didn't say, "God, you must have forgotten me." He realized God had a purpose for him, even in the midst of his difficulties, for blessing, and he wanted to see that will worked out in his life. How about you and me today, even though we may be in the middle of the surf? Paul was amazingly preserved from bitterness even when there were those who preached the gospel, he says in verse 15, "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 partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice."

Paul was an amazingly magnanimous man, and, in my own judgment, this doesn't refer here to the Judaizing teachers, because their teaching was false. But apparently people preached the gospel even though their motives were impure, and maybe they did it a little different way than Paul did. But Paul was thankful that the gospel was preached. That was his only concern. He wasn't concerned about his evangelistic association or his organization or his personal reputation even though, no doubt, many of these people did this in an attempt to increase Paul's frustration. Paul was glad that the gospel was preached. That's an attitude of magnanimity you and I need to get hold of. You know, we're great at criticizing other people sometimes and kind of a reverse of this principle. I often think of D. L. Moody's statement when people complain about the way somebody or something was doing something—that they would do differently if they were doing it. D. L. Moody would reply to such people and say, "Well, I like the way I'm doing something better than the way you're doing nothing." And there's a great deal of truth in that. And if and when people criticize you—ultimately, down the road—for the way you do it, or the music is too fast or slow or what or what, you know (and there are all kinds of things that can get people shook up: fleas on elephants that they're great at picking out), be comforted by that and don't be disturbed. And if people go off and do it a different way, recognize Paul's attitude here and don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by jealousy or concern or bitterness in that realm, either. Paul saw the power of God in his present. And then, finally, Paul saw the providential sovereignty of God in his future. Paul's future was uncertain. Nero was totally unpredictable. [Paul] didn't know what was going to happen to him. He had a kind of

a hunch, a conviction, that he was going to come through the situation, and in fact he did. But he says, “I know that whatever happens through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.” He wasn’t at that point talking about being freed from jail but for his good. But then he says he’s in a great tension because he wants now, as always, to have Christ honored in his body, whether by life or by death. He says, “To me to live is Christ, to die is gain.” And then he goes on to say, “If it’s life in the flesh, that’s further and fruitful labor for me; and if it’s death, that’s fine—I’m in the presence of Christ” [v.20-23]. Paul, incidentally, wasn’t looking to death as a cop-out, but rather he saw death as the fulfillment of the ministry that God has given him. Paul has confidence in God for the future. It was totally uncertain, but Paul was obviously at peace. Now, your future and mine are uncertain. Many of you don’t know where you’re going to be and what God wants you to do. Many of you don’t know how you’re going to get the money to finish school, perhaps. Some of us have difficulties and problems we don’t know the outcome of, and we’re concerned about it. And if we’ve seen the providential sovereignty of God at work in our past, [if] we are aware of his presence and power in the immediate present, then we can relax so far as the future is concerned and thank God that though we don’t know what the future holds, we can rest secure knowing that the same God of love who gave himself in Jesus Christ to die for us has got a purpose of blessing and good for us in the future. What about the future haunts you today? There has never been more uncertainty in the world at large about the future than now. There are no safe places in the world—politically, physically, economically. Yet our lives are in God’s

hands, and we can be confident, trusting him to unfold it as we are active in working out his purposes in our lives. God grant, then, that for each of us this morning we'll be able to thank God for all that's gone into our past, including those things that may have really given us bitterness and second thoughts. But he'll give us the vision to see his presence and power and providence at work in our immediate situation and that as we have the butterflies about the future (and it's unknown), we can relax and trust God, who has demonstrated his love for us, that what he does in the future and what he allows will be according to his loving will. And nothing in the future, as it hasn't in the past or in the present, will happen by accident. And we can rest with confidence in that. Shall we pray? Grant, Lord, that whatever this means for each of us in our own personal experience this morning may be illumined to us by the Holy Spirit, and that the same joy and power and effectiveness that came to Paul through the realization of that in his situation may be ours as well, for your glory and our profit. We ask with thanksgiving in Jesus' name. Amen.