

Matt will be out of town for the next couple of weeks, so I wanted to use this time that we have together to cover a book or a letter in the Bible with you. The book I picked is Philemon. If you've read it, that's great. Hopefully the Lord will speak to you as you read it again. If you haven't read it, it really is a rich, powerful letter that the apostle Paul wrote to this man named Philemon. So as we begin, hopefully we'll excavate lots of different truths from these Scriptures that we can apply to our lives. But just to let you in to my little pastoral mind and pastoral heart, there's a few things this week and next week that I really want us to see together as we read this letter.

The first thing I want us to see in Philemon, through Paul's writings, is his love for the saints, his love for the church, his love for people and how he lovingly, graciously and very wisely handles a very difficult situation. And I think that Paul, at some points, can be characterized as a sharp man, a difficult man, as a hard man, as a stern man, as a guy who really knows how to speak the truth but more often than not he doesn't speak the truth in love. I think we kind of get that caricature of Paul in our minds. And I'm not saying there's not a good reason for that. Most of the letters in the New Testament are Paul writing to these churches and correcting them, rebuking them and exhorting them. So I think there are times in the Bible where you see what Paul is writing and you go, "Man, Paul was a really strong guy. He was a really strong leader." Yes he was, but at the same time he was always leading and teaching and calling out the truth in love. And I think in this letter it's very clear how he loves the saints. And it's very clear that Paul's just a guy who can sit down and write to the Corinthian church "Love is patient, love is kind..." but he was a man who exemplified it. And in this most personal of letters, I think you can really see his pastoral heart coming out for the people to whom he was writing. You can really see his love for the saints. And even as he speaks difficult truths into a delicate situation, you see his grace, his kindness and his love. And I just want us to see that. I don't want us to see Paul as this guy who just beats people up all the time. There's time he tells the truth, and it's just difficult. It doesn't matter how you say it; it's just hard to hear and it feels like it's beating you up. But in this letter, you can really see another side of Paul that maybe is not as clear in the other letters. So that's one thing. I just want us to see Paul's love for the church. I want you to see his love for his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second thing I want us to see is really how Paul sees his circumstances and all the circumstances of everybody in this letter as being governed, managed and overseen by a watchful, loving heavenly Father. I want you to see that Paul does not see life purely through horizontal lenses. We've talked about this before, how sin and circumstances in our lives have a way of skillfully causing us to take this grand narrative of God reconciling men and women to Himself through His Son and turning it into the story of life as our story. And sin has a way of causing us to be dominated by ourselves in such a way that we completely forget about what's really going on and we're just so consumed with what's going on in our little world, our little kingdom that we completely forget that our little story fits into the big story. And although our little story is important, it's not the only thing going on in the world. And we get this tunnel vision, and we're just dominated by ourselves all the time. Everyday we just live life dominated by what's going on in our kingdom, our world, our lives, and we completely see life through horizontal lenses and forget that God's doing stuff in this world that's not all about us. We forget that our little life fits into what God's doing in this world since He spoke it into creation. And when you read this letter, you can't help but see how Paul understand that. And not only that, but you will see how his understanding of the providence of God and how his life fits into that completely changes the way he responds to circumstances and the way that he lives life day in and day out. I want us to see that because I think so many of us are

just stuck in the horizontal and we never find any freedom because we continue to fail to see how what's going on in our personal world fits in with the big picture of what God's doing in the world.

The last thing I want you to see as you read this letter is the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want you to see the good news that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been ransomed and how we have been freed from the wrath of God through Jesus Christ and reconciled to the Father. I want you to see how that truth, as it penetrates and transforms our heart, also transforms our relationships, especially those relationships in which we've been wronged. It completely changes the way that Christians relate to relationships when we believe the gospel and allow it to work itself out in every area of our life, specifically relationships.

So those are the three things I want you to see: Paul's love for God's people, the way that Paul sees life as a life being governed, overseen and managed by a good and providential, wise loving Father and also how the gospel changes the way we do relationships. So that's what's going on in this letter. That's what I want us to get. If you get nothing else, as we read through the letter, hopefully you'll be able to see some of those things popping out.

So let me start by reading an introduction from the ESV Bible. Here is a summary of the letter of Philemon. "Philemon is about reconciliation and relationships between Christians. Onesimus was a slave of a believer named Philemon in Colossae. Apparently Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and fled. At some time while Paul was under arrest, Onesimus met him and became a Christian. Paul apparently wrote this letter at the same time as Colossians and gave it to Onesimus to carry back to Philemon. Paul appealed to Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household, but as a brother in the Lord rather than a slave."

So before we jump in, I want to just talk about one thing for a moment that hopefully you thought about as I read that summary. I want to cover the issue of slavery. This issue is such a big deal. This becomes a stumbling block for many people when it comes to believing the Bible. More often than not, I think it's just an excuse. They just don't want to talk about Jesus, so they talk about the things in the Bible they disagree with or they think they disagree with. This is not a theoretical thing that happens either. I got an e-mail a couple of weeks ago from a brother in the church who was trying to share the gospel with his neighbor. His neighbor grew up in the church, walked away and has since been angry. So he doesn't believe in Jesus anymore and he doesn't believe in the Bible. One of the reasons he gave for not believing in the Bible is because it condones slavery in several Old Testament passages. So my friend wrote me an e-mail and said, "What do I do with this? It seems like these verses in the Scriptures are justifying slavery." This really is a stumbling block, so I wanted to take a moment and pastor you through this. And this church is a church that is passionate about racial harmony, that is passionate about bringing the nations here, every tribe, tongue and color. We love that, because that's what heaven is going to be like. Not to stop for a minute before we get into the letter would really be foolish of me.

When most of us think of the word "slavery" we immediately think of 19th century Western slavery. And 19th century Western slavery is a shameful page in the history of America and a shameful page in the history of the American church. It's not just America, but it was the church. Up until the Civil War, the church was the moral compass of our nation. It was the institution that men and women looked to for answers and guidance. And when the Civil War came and the church of Jesus Christ could not agree on slavery, people became disillusioned with the church and quit looking to it as a moral compass. And ever since, the church has been trying to win their affections back and doing everything we can to get people to like us. But the church missed it on this one. And it's a shameful, wicked page in the history of America and the church. However, 19th century Western slavery is not very similar to the type of slavery that was the context for Israel or for the early church. So the slavery that we are familiar with in our history is not the same kind of slavery when we read it in this letter and when you read it in the Bible. The two were drastically different. Now I know I'm speaking big picture here, so maybe there were some instances where slaves were abused in the Greco-Roman world

and before that. But in general, when you read about it in the Bible, you can't take 19th century slavery and read that into these documents. We're not talking about the same thing. Becoming a slave in Paul's day was very unlike slavery in America primarily in that it was not a racial issue. Slaves consisted of all races. A person became a slave in biblical times by being so poor that they sold themselves into slavery to have a better life, they were born into slavery or abandoned as children and taken into slavery, sold into slavery by parents, taken in war or in paying off an outstanding debt. I'm not trying to justify it; I'm just telling you that it's different. In fact, when I was talking to this professor, he said, "Do you know Alexander the Great? Do you know who Alexander the Great's slave was? It was a guy by the name of Aristotle. Do you know what Aristotle's role as a slave was? It was to teach this man Alexander about Greek culture and the Greek language." And of course we know that Alexander the Great went on to take the Greek culture and the Greek language to all the known world. In fact, we have our Bible written in Greek because a slave named Aristotle taught a pupil named Alexander who took the Greek culture and language to the known world. It's just not the same. Both the Old and New Testaments give certain instructions on the treatment of slaves which focus on compassion, kindness, etc. You can read that in Deuteronomy 15, Deuteronomy 21, Ephesians 6, Colossians 4. Over and over again, the Bible talks about how masters and slaves ought to treat one another. In fact, in Deuteronomy 27, it says that if you punch your in the mouth and break his tooth, you need to let your slave go free. That verse alone in the Law of God would have guarded from all the atrocities that we've seen. The Bible's reference to slavery is not an endorsement of it as much as it is a dealing with the reality of it. And slavery, as it is addressed and practiced in the Scriptures, actually keeps slaves and masters from the atrocities of it that we are familiar and disgusted with.

Furthermore, the Scriptures stress that the reality of all humanity is that every single one of us in this room are enslaved. We're either slaves to sin, Satan and fleshly desires or we are enslaved to the true God and King, Jesus Christ. There is no freedom apart from being captives to Jesus Christ. It is only in our captivity that our greatest joy is found as our master treats us with compassion and kindness. And this is the basis for how the New Testament expects slave owners to treat their slaves. So rather than to try to overthrow the cultural institution of slavery, Paul sought to work within the system, requiring that slaves obey their masters and that masters not mistreat their slaves. And although Paul was clearly supportive of emancipation (1 Corinthians 7) and clearly portrayed emancipation as a more preferable way, he was definitely more concerned with spiritual freedom than with the release of slaves and the overthrowing of the social institution as it was in his day. Paul's method in addressing slavery is much more subtle than attempting to overthrow the entire social system of his day. Like Jesus, his way of changing the world is to plant a grain of mustard seed which inconspicuous at first grows into a spreading tree, and in the meantime he teaches slaves and masters themselves and each other as human beings.

So I just wanted to take a moment and talk about that. I know I didn't answer all questions. I know this wasn't a full out history lecture on that. I'd really love to talk with you about this sometime outside of this service. This is really a conversation I'd rather have over a cup of coffee than up here like this. But for our church and who we want to be, a church of all nations, a church of racial harmony, I felt that to not stop and talk about this would really just wouldn't be a good thing. And as we have these conversations and as you have these conversations, just be real gracious and kind and humble. So I just wanted to take a moment and do my part leading out in that.

Okay, let's read Philemon, and hopefully the Lord will be gracious and speak to us by His Spirit as we read this powerful, inspired letter. Starting in Philemon 1:1, "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house." Paul addresses this letter to all those people, but from here on out, Paul is going to specifically talk to Philemon his brother. He says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints..." So he starts by just saying, "When I think about you, my heart just overflows with thanksgiving to God

because you love people and you love the church of Jesus Christ. And your faith and love for Jesus Christ is so evident." John Calvin says about this, "This praise, which [Paul] bestows on Philemon, includes briefly the whole perfection of a Christian man. It consists of two parts, faith in Christ, and love towards our neighbors; for to these all the actions and all the duties of our life relate." So Paul is talking to this man and saying, "I thank God for you, brother. You love people and you love God. And I just don't thank God for you, I'm also praying to God for you." He says in verse 6, "...and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." Many people think that the "sharing of your faith" means evangelism. I don't think that's what he's talking about because it doesn't fit in the context of what Paul writes in the rest of the letter. I think what the phrase "sharing of your faith" refers to the fact that he's a believer in Jesus Christ. As believers, we share in the faith. Tonight, we're sharing in the faith together. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you share in the faith of Jesus Christ. So as we gather together, we're sharing our faith. So he's saying, "I thank God for you and I'm praying for you as you continue to share and walk in faith, that the sharing of your faith will be effective and it would lead you to know what to do, every good thing to do in the situations you come into, namely the one I'm about to tell you about." He's saying, "I'm hoping as you walk and act like a believer in Jesus Christ that you should know what you should do, especially in this situation with Onesimus.

In verse 7 he concludes talking to Philemon in his greeting. "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." Do you have anybody that you know who, when you're around them, your heart is just refreshed by them, encouraged by them because of the way they love God, because of the way they love people? Do you have anybody in your life who encourages you just by the way they love the Lord and people, someone in whom the Spirit is obviously and overtly working continuously to produce fruit? As I was reading this this week, I thought about a guy I lived with for a year. His name is Mickey Eckles, and I lived with his family up in Portland. Every time I think about Mickey, I'm just encouraged by his faith. The guy's not on any podcast, he's not writing any books, but I don't care where he's at or what kind of season of life he's in, every time you talk to him, the consistent ethos that is coming out of his life is that he is growing in his love for the Lord and he's serving and loving people. Even when I just think about it, I'm just so encouraged. I want to be around the guy. And that's what Paul is saying to Philemon. This is who Philemon is. This is our introduction to Philemon. Paul's saying, "I'm just so encouraged by you, brother. I thank God for you, I'm praying for you and I'm just refreshed by your faith." This is the introduction to Philemon.

And now Paul is going to get into why he wrote the letter. Verse 8, "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you..." So Paul says, "Therefore, I'm going to appeal to you to do something." And I think, even in the way Paul appeals to Philemon, you can begin to see his wisdom, his love and his grace. Because Paul could write this letter and say, "Here's what you need to do. I'm going to command you to do this. That's it. End of story. No conversation. That's how it's going to be. That's how I'm going to lead you in this area." And he does that in other letters, but in this letter, he doesn't just command Philemon what to do although he said he could do that. "Though I could do that, what I prefer to do in this situation is appeal to you and appeal to your heart." And I think buried in this text is such a brilliant, wise, loving seasoned example of leadership and influence. Because really he could tell him what to do, but he would maybe just be getting at the action. So if he just told Philemon what to do, maybe he would do it, but his heart wouldn't be in it. So Paul doesn't just address the action, he says, "I'm going appeal and plead with you to do this. And I'm going to appeal to your heart so that you'll be with me." And I think that's just so wise. If the primary way you leaders out there lead is by telling people to do stuff "because I said so," you leaders need some transformation in a big way. It's okay to do that from time to time. Sometimes you need to look at the people you're leading and say, "Just trust me on this one." Whether that's your wife, whether that's your children, whether you're a teacher, whether you're a coach, if the way you consistently try to lead is by domineering and telling people what to do, I think you're just not leading as well as you could be. And the apostle Paul really sets a good example for us. He appeals to his brother's heart. And as a husband, it took me about a year to realize that my wife does much better when I

appeal to her heart and shepherd her heart towards where I want to lead here than me just telling her where we're going and to get on the team. I just look at this, and I see that the apostle Paul is just wise. He knows people and is a great pastor.

He continues, "I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment." Two things in this verse. Number one, the apostle Paul just called this runaway slave and thief his son. One of the commentaries I read this week said this about this verse, "This forms a Christian reply to the institution of slavery. Onesimus, in the lowest social status in the Roman world, a slave with no rights, was on a spiritual plane equal with his owner Philemon and with the leading apostle." As he's in jail, the apostle Paul begets this son in the faith, and he looks at this runaway slave, this thief, and he just says, "He's been redeemed, and he's my son." That's a powerful picture of what we've been talking about. Not only that, but the other thing I think you can't just miss is that he's actually in prison and this is the way that he's thinking about his life. He's in prison and he's not just seeing things horizontally, he's not just sitting in the cell complaining and feeling sorry for himself and being depressed. Instead he's sitting in this cell and he's seeing every opportunity as an opportunity to share the gospel. So in comes this runaway thief, this slave. Who knows how he got in there. So even we who are reading this letter two thousand years later should see the providence of God at work here. If you don't see the way God turns circumstances that are bad into good for others and it doesn't blow you away, you're missing it. So he's sitting in his cell, in comes Onesimus and Paul shares the gospel and Onesimus becomes a believer in Jesus Christ. It's unbelievable. And again Paul is giving us a lesson that even circumstances that are less than ideal should be seen for what they are, an opportunity to share the gospel with whoever comes into this jail cell and talks to him. That's incredible and especially convicting as I look at my life. All the things I complain about each day, lines I have to wait in, an internet that doesn't go fast enough, whatever it is, how rarely do I see those circumstances as an opportunity that maybe the Lord's doing something.

Paul continues, "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus. . . (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)" This here is a play on words because the name Onesimus means "helpful." So Paul is saying, "Now that he's become a believer in Jesus Christ, it's transformed his character and he's actually living up to his name now." Before he was useless and now he's useful. Christianity changes our character. It changes everything about us. If you've really become a believer in Jesus Christ, from one degree of glory to another, the Lord changes us. So we are better students, we are better sons and daughters, we're better parents and we're better husbands and wives. It changes every area of our lives, and Paul is looking at this slave and saying, "He's become a believer, and it's changed him. And he's gone from being useless to being useful. And he's living up to his name finally."

He says this in verse 12, "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart." Again, you can just hear Paul's love for his son. Verse 13, "I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord." Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus there with him, because he was really serving him in a way that was useful for the gospel, for his joy, for other people's good. And he would have loved to have kept him, but in his maturity and wisdom, Paul said, "But what I want is not what's best for everybody. Him staying here with me would be absolutely useful to me and be a blessing to me, but it wouldn't be the best thing for Onesimus or Philemon because they need to be reconciled. It wouldn't be the best thing for the church in Colossae." So Paul has the maturity to look at his life as a Christian and go, "It doesn't really matter what I want." And I think that's a great work for our generation. There has to come a point, as the Spirit continues to form you and conform you into the image of Jesus Christ, where more and more and more we learn that this whole life is not about what we want. But honestly, we just function like it is. We take circumstances and think about them that way, and then we begin to manipulate and try to control in order to get it to go the way we want it. And it's amazing how much time we actually

spend brainstorming about how we can manipulate and get things to go exactly the way we want it to go. And Paul just looks at the situation and goes, "This would be great for me to have this guy here with me full-time, but it's not about what I want and it's not about my good. I'm a slave to Christ, and I'm not my own anymore. I don't live for myself, so I'm going to die to myself in this area for what's better for Onesimus, Philemon and the rest of the brothers and sisters in faith." What maturity does this man have that we can follow.

And then in verse 15 he says, "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." And so Paul writes this sitting in this jail cell which gives him a lot more authority to say what he just said to Philemon. He's looking at these horizontal circumstances in Philemon's life, he's making an appeal to receive Onesimus back and he steps back from it. I can just imagine him going, "And maybe Philemon, these circumstances that you've been frustrated about, maybe the whole reason for these things is that God was saving Onesimus, that He might send him back not just as a slave but as a brother." And so Paul invites Philemon to step out of the horizontal and says, "Don't forget to look at the big picture of what's really going on here. You got wronged, your slave ran away and it got really bad for you, but maybe God allowed that to happen in His providence so that this brother could get saved."

And I'm just amazed as I laid down my life over this Scripture this week how confessionally I think a lot about the providence of God, but functionally I don't live like that. I don't think about circumstances like that, especially circumstances that are uncomfortable or painful or just bad. I just don't think like that. In fact, I read a little story in one of the commentaries that I wanted to share with you. This pastor said, "'I've told,' said my friend, 'that God is an artist and we are His paintings.' 'Yes,' I said, 'and actually I think Paul says something like this in Ephesians 2:10, that we are His handiwork.' 'Well,' my friend replied, 'that's as it may be, but I think that sometimes, in my life at least, God is an artist who hurls His paint pot at the canvas from the other side of the room and then stands back and says to Himself, 'Now that's very interesting. What should We do next?'" And for those of you who are covenant members or regular attenders here, I don't think that any of us would hear that story and go, "That's what I believe about the providence of God. I believe that He manages my life in such a careless way that He's like the artist who stands on the other side of the room and just throws the bucket against the canvas with this random thing happening and Him going, 'Oh, didn't see that one coming. I guess We ought to do something about that.'" None of us would read the Scriptures and say we agree with that. But functionally, we live this way. We absolutely live as if that's the case.

And rather than me get at you, let me just share my own heart. I wrote some things down that maybe could make it a little bit more clear about how we live functionally. Here's just my own life as I read this this week and was just convicted. I wrote this, "For someone who believes that God is in control of all things and He is working everything that happens in my life together for good, I sure do complain a lot. For someone who believes that everything in my life is under the watchful, gracious, loving eyes of my Father in heaven, I sure do fear and worry relentlessly. And for someone who believes God will always take the harm that others inflict or attempt to inflict upon me and turn it into my good, I sure do get angry with others easily and carry around loads of bitterness." And on and on and on I could go. So I just wanted to ask you what I've been asking myself this week. I wonder what areas or area of your life you have where you confessionally trust the providence and sovereignty of God but functionally you don't trust the Lord at all. And you complain, you get angry and you worry to the point where you can't sleep and have to get on drugs. Can we be honest here? How many of us take Ambien here just so we can go to sleep, because of our fear, because of our anxiety, because of our not trusting the Lord functionally? And listen, I've taken medicine, so I'm not bagging on that at all. But can we just get gut-level honest and talk about functionally, do we really trust the Lord? Do we really trust that He's working things for our good? Do we really believe the songs that we sing? And I'm not even talking about some big thing in your life. I'm talking about when you're sitting in traffic. I'm talking about when all you want is to go home and just read a

book and have some quiet but your roommate is just annoying. And in that moment, because you were demanding this time of peace and relaxation, you don't trust that maybe the Lord gave you this opportunity to sanctify you. But you just get angry because they got in the way of your will. And before we know it, these little habits again cause us to take life and shrink it down and it's all about us. And we don't trust the Lord at all. What we really do is try to control, and when we can't get things under control, we get angry or we get sad and depressed. And the whole time, we think the problem is the circumstances, but the problem is we don't trust the Lord. But we're so afraid and ashamed to admit that, so we never really grow through it. We just continue to perpetually complain about our circumstances, and we just see life horizontally and we're just stuck. We never find freedom, we never find life and we come in and wonder where the Lord is and why He hasn't helped us. The whole time He's going, "You know what? Maybe those circumstances are the help you've been asking for to drive you to the feet of the Lord, to ask for His mercy and to ask that He would increase your faith to trust Him, submit to Him and follow Him." And I think this is where we live life.

Paul is a great example in this letter, but he's only a good example because he's following the example of Jesus Christ. Paul's not the hero; Jesus is the hero. And Paul is trying to follow Jesus Christ. And when you think about Jesus Christ, I hope tonight that we're amazed how Jesus Christ really did trust the Father. Over and over and over again in the Scriptures do we read this. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the garden of the olive press, Jesus was pressed more than in a way that none of us has ever been pressed because we at some point in that pressing, we give into temptation. Jesus Christ never gave into temptation. . And He was pressed to a degree further than any of us. And as He was pressed in the garden, He prayed to His Father and said, "Father, if there's another way, let's do that way. But not My will, Your will. I trust You." Hebrews would say, "For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross." So He stepped back from the cross and was able to look over it and see the joy beyond it. He was able to get out of the horizontal and see and remember what was really going on in the circumstance, that He was reconciling those who would put their faith in Him to the Father.

Let me close with one of my favorite passages in Scripture. Talking about Jesus Christ and His suffering, Peter says this in 1 Peter 2, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." So Paul is not our ultimate example. Paul is an example that points to the main example, which is Jesus Christ. And as we celebrate Jesus Christ tonight, that's what we are celebrating, that He was obedient to death, even death on a cross. And all the way to the cross, He kept entrusting Himself to the Father, and He calls us to do the same.

Let me pray for us. "Father, I really do pray as we think about these things that You would reveal to us the areas where we don't trust you. Reveal the areas we don't trust you functionally, where we don't believe that You're a good, faithful, wise, loving Father. We think You're just a painter who just threw the pot from the other side of the room and just randomly lets things happen to us, and we prove it every day by the way we respond and react. So I know for my brothers and sisters that that's not who we want to be as Your sons and daughters. That's not who we want to be as a family. We want to be a family that really trusts You and, like the apostle Paul and Jesus, and sees what's really going on in life, that in Japan and Pakistan and in Saudi Arabia and in Guatemala, from the beginning to the end that You are reconciling sons and daughters to Yourself and that our vapor of a life fits in that story. And if it doesn't, if our life becomes about our life, it's just so disappointing and depressing. So would You save us from that? And I do pray for my brothers and sisters. I know some of them in here are just in some dark circumstances. I pray that You would comfort them and encourage them. I pray that in their grief, they would be able to look to the Lord Jesus tonight and realize that He knows more than anyone the pain, the fear and the heartache. So as we come to the table tonight, we come with our fears and our anger,

we come with our lack of faith, we ask You to strengthen our faith. As we remember You Son, we ask You that You would make us men and women who trust Him and follow Him like the apostle Paul. So Lord, be glorified as we remember Your Son. And by Your Spirit, encourage us, unify us and give us more faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

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