

The Resurrection as Historical Miracle

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Braemar Baptist. I'm back with you again for another week. My name is Randall Rauser. I am a professor at Taylor Seminary, and today I want to build on what I talked about last week. Last week, I looked at the idea of evidence and arguments as being essential to Christian belief, and that's very much contrary to this popular idea among some skeptics that Christian faith and belief is about turning off your brains and rejecting evidence and argument. I think it's quite the opposite, in fact. And this week, I want to look at evidence and arguments for the pivotal miracle at the heart of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus. We are just a few weeks away from Easter, and of course, the time when we celebrate the resurrection. We're also in the midst continued now of a pandemic, of the COVID-19 pandemic, and trying to figure out what God is doing in the midst of this all. And I think at times like this, it can help us to remember the great things that God has done, the way that he has acted in history. It may not explain everything that we're experiencing now, but we can at least have hope and trust and conviction that he does have a plan in the midst of it all. So we want to turn to this topic. I want to begin by talking about two different ways to believe in the resurrected Jesus. And the first way that we can believe in the resurrected Jesus is as a matter of faith, an exercise of trust. Last week, I explained the idea of faith with respect to this illustration of this famous high wire walker named the Great Blondin.

And back in 1859, he stretched a cable across Niagara Falls. People came and watched him, and they cheered him on knowing his reputation as he walked across the cable and back. And then he got a wheelbarrow and he rolled the wheelbarrow back and they all cheered. And then he put a bag of flour in it and rolled the wheelbarrow with the flour across the falls and back again. And everybody cheered. And then he said, do you think I could carry a person in this wheelbarrow across the falls? And they all said, you can do it. And he said, get in. Now, here's what was going on there.

He gave them evidence. He gave them a basis for being willing to get in the wheelbarrow, but he also was asking them to take a step of faith, a trust. And each one of us, God has acted, revealed himself to us in different ways, right? That he's revealed himself to us through his scripture, through the witness of other Christians and the community of faith, maybe through miracles and other signs that he's given us in our own lives. And all of that is a basis to take a step of faith, to get in the wheelbarrow, to trust and believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

But occasionally, you will encounter people who are skeptics, and they don't accept some of the experiences that you've had. They don't accept your view of the authority of scripture and so on. The situation then may be like the situation I described last week when I encountered two Mormon missionaries. And these fellows wanted me to convert to Mormonism. And I said, yeah, but these are the problems I have with Mormonism. There's evidence that suggests Mormonism is false. So what do you do with that evidence? And they didn't have a good reply. They were asking me to get in the wheelbarrow, but I had good evidence and reasons not to get in the wheelbarrow. So we went our separate ways.

[3 : 36] You will encounter people, and there are people who ask the question, well, what reason do I have if I don't accept your experiences or your scripture? What reasons do I have to believe in the resurrection of Jesus based upon history? And I want to offer a response to those people today. And not just to those people, but I want to show Christians how your conviction in Jesus, while it is very much maybe an exercise of faith and reasonable trust, it is also grounded in events in history that are attested to in historical documents. So I want to do a little bit of history for us today. Now, first of all, I want to stress that this matters. It's not simply something that we might choose to do, but it's really secondary to Christian faith. The historical resurrection of Jesus is core to Christian faith. To see this, I want to compare and contrast Christianity with another religion, Buddhism. Buddhism is, of course, centered on another very famous figure, the Buddha, Sudhartha

Gautama. And allegedly, the Buddha achieved his enlightenment in around the year 500 BC or so, and he gave these teachings to the Buddhist community. And the teachings are four noble truths. All life is suffering. Suffering arises from desire. To eliminate desire is to eliminate suffering, and you achieve this through the eightfold path. And that is the kernel teaching of Buddhism. Here's the important thing to recognize. Whether the Buddha existed or not is independent of the fourfold, the four noble truths and the eightfold path. The central gospel of Buddhism is independent of the historical person, the Buddha. He may or may not have existed. It makes no difference to Buddhism. Christianity is not like that. The central gospel proclamation of Christianity, the good news is that God raised Jesus from the dead. If Jesus has not been raised, our faith is in vain. And Paul indeed says precisely that in 1 Corinthians 15. If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless. Our preaching is useless. And so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God. For we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. So it's a difference to Paul. On the one hand, our preaching is useless if he has not been raised. It's like, you know, selling some particular vaccine to protect you from the coronavirus, and yet it is utterly ineffectual. And we're like that. But it's worse than that. Paul says, if he's not been raised, we've been witnessing falsely about what God has done in history. And God's wrath will come down on us.

[6 : 38] So it matters. It matters critically whether Jesus, in fact, was raised from the dead. And it is a historical claim. With that in mind, I want to consider the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

Now, here we're going to look at the Bible in particular, because the Bible is the heart of this witness. But the thing I want to stress is that the Bible is not a single witness to Jesus. It's rather a library, in particular, the New Testament is a library of witnesses to Jesus. And let me briefly talk about the main ones. First of all, in this library, we have the Gospels. Historians often refer to these as Greco-Roman biographies. That was an established way of writing history in the first century. And the Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, appear to be following the standard approach of writing a great biography of a great person, a Greco-Roman biography.

But in terms of the sources behind the four Gospels, it's a little bit more complicated. New Testament scholars believe that Mark is the earliest Gospel. Most of them believe that. [8 : 00] And they believe that Matthew and Luke depended for some of their material on Mark. And this is why there is some material that appears in Mark and also appears in Matthew and Luke.

So Matthew and Luke draw upon Mark material. But there is also material that is unique to Matthew. And there is material that is unique to Luke. And so the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are good examples.

And that material is called M material for the material unique to Matthew. And L material for the material that is unique to Luke. Scholars have also noted that there is additional material which is in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark.

That material is often called Q. And it's believed by many scholars to be a hypothetical additional source. And then you have the Gospel of John. So you may have five different sources that are stitched into four Gospels, all witnessing to this person, Jesus.

When were the Gospels written? Many scholars date Mark as the earliest Gospel to having been written just around the time of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

[9 : 14] If so, that would put the Gospel just under 40 years after the death of Jesus. That's quite early. But I'm going to argue that, in fact, you can place Mark significantly earlier. And I'll give an argument like this.

We've already said that Mark comes before, likely comes before Luke. And Luke is a sequel, or sorry, Acts is a sequel to the book of Luke.

Because Luke, Acts is really one long work. Keeping that in mind, ask this question, how does the book of Acts end? Well, Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome.

Now, we know that Paul was martyred in Rome under Nero around the year AD 66, 67. So, the best explanation, I believe, as to why the book ends with Paul in prison is that Paul is still in prison when Luke was writing the book.

And if that's the case, then that would mean that Luke, or Acts, was written in the mid-60s. And if Acts is a sequel to Luke, then Luke was written probably in the early 60s.

[10:21] And if Luke depends upon Mark, that would mean Mark was written in perhaps the mid-50s, which would place Mark just over 20 years. Not 40, but 20 after the death of Jesus.

Now, we can nuzzle about the dates here, but I think the point we should recognize is that the Gospels are coming as quite early, certainly by the standards of ancient history.

The epistles bring us, in some cases, even earlier. The epistles are letters, and in particular today, we'll be looking at 1 Corinthians.

And so, we'll be returning. I just quoted from 1 Corinthians 15, 13, and 14. We're going to focus on the same chapter, 15, but verses 3 to 7 or 3 to 8.

I'm going to argue that chapter 15, verses 3 to 7, actually has material that comes to within a couple years, perhaps around the year 35 or so of the death of Jesus.

[11:21] So, within two years, perhaps. Not 20, not 40, but two. That is extraordinary. Now, I want to also deal with a common view.

So, I dealt with a moment ago this common view that some skeptics have. Well, the Bible is just a single document. The second thing people will say is, well, the Bible is a religious document. But again, I want us to appreciate that while Christians believe the Bible, all of it is God-inspired scripture from 1 Timothy 3, 16 and 17, all of it is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness to equip every person for good works.

Nonetheless, these documents are also historical documents. The Gospels are Greco-Roman biographies. They're histories.

The Epistles are documents being written, letters being written in the early church that have historical import. So, we can't let the fact that they are also religious and spiritual or believed to be inspired by Christians, that can't obscure the fact that they are also historical documents.

They're human and divine. F.F. Bruce put the skepticism like this. He was a New Testament scholar. He says, Somehow or other, there are people who regard a sacred book as ipso facto, or in other words, for that very reason that it's sacred, under suspicion, and demand much more corroborative evidence for such a work than they would for an ordinary secular or pagan writing.

[12:52] I see this a lot. I find skeptics who will just reject the Bible out of hand because Christians accept it as God-inspired scripture. But they'll look at other historians from the first or second centuries, people like Josephus or Tacitus or Suetonius, and they'll say, oh, that's good history, but the New Testament, oh, no, that's the Bible.

But of course, that is just a prejudice, as F.F. Bruce is pointing out here. Before these documents were recognized as scripture, they were also and began as historical documents, and that is how we will examine them today.

So how does one do a historical investigation? Let me just give you a very simple illustration. You look at all the evidence and you figure out what is the best theory to explain all the evidence.

So here's an event. The event is that you have a cookie sitting on your kitchen table. You leave the room, and when you come back, there's a bite out of the cookie.

So you have to ask, how did the bite get taken out of the cookie? You are now being a historian. You're going to look at all the evidence available to you and figure out what is the best explanation for what happened in the past.

[14:05] And that's just what historians do. So you look and you see that your puppy is in the room, and he has a guilty expression on his face. Furthermore, you look closely at the puppy and you see that there are crumbs in his muzzle.

And you look around and you don't see anyone else in the room. Based upon the evidence, what is the most likely explanation? Who ate the cookie?

I'd say the puppy, right? He's there. He looks guilty. He has crumbs on his muzzle. There's no one else around who could have done it. Well, then it's the puppy. That's how you do history, really.

I mean, it can get a lot more complicated, but that's the basic idea. You look at all the evidence, and you say, what is the best explanation for the evidence available to us? I want to do that now with respect to the evidence for what early Christians believed about Jesus.

What is the best explanation for that evidence? And the text that I want to focus on is, again, 1 Corinthians 15, verses 3 to 7. Let's start off by reading the passage.

[15:18] Paul says, It says, Okay, the first thing I want to consider is this.

How early is the teaching that Paul is recounting in 1 Corinthians 15? Okay, 1 Corinthians was written about the year 54, and there's a lot of reasons why we can date it to that point.

But Paul is saying, we'll back up here. What I received, I'll put that down there. In other words, he's saying, what I'm now recording to you is not something I'm giving you now for the first time. It's something I gave you before. So we know that Paul was previously in Corinth in approximately 51 AD. So he is now in verse 3 to 7. He's recalling to them what he originally gave them at that time. So that now puts us... So within 18 years of ground zero, that's where that puts us. But then the question is this. Well, Paul here says, what I received, I passed on.

[16:52] So when did Paul receive this? Well, it seems that Paul was likely... Had his Damascus Road experience early on and around the year 34, about a year after the death of Jesus.

And then we read in Galatians, he says this. After three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Kephas, that is Peter, and stayed with him 15 days.

I saw none of the other apostles, only James, the Lord's brother. So that's about the year 37. So in all likelihood, then, the very latest that Paul could have received this teaching is the year 37, when he went up to Jerusalem.

He may well have received it before. But 37 is now within four years of the death of Jesus. And of course, this teaching was not just teaching that was formulated for Paul in that moment.

It was teaching that was already circulating within the community of Jerusalem. So when Paul received it in 37, at the very latest, he may have received it earlier in Damascus, but at the very latest in 37 in Jerusalem, it was already circulating.

[18:00] So that would mean you could, again, easily date this to above the year 35, 34, maybe 33. Within one or two years of the death of Jesus, you have the teaching that we are now looking at.

That is extraordinary, that lack of time gap. Okay. Now, in terms of the passage itself, what does 1 Corinthians 15, 3 to 7 tell us?

First thing, I want to note five things here. The first thing I want to highlight is the rabbinic context of the passage. Second thing is how it teaches that Jesus died for our sins and was buried.

Third is that he was raised and the tomb was found empty. Fourth, he was then seen alive by followers and some skeptics. And five, I want to talk about how the teaching spread from Jerusalem.

So let's talk first about the rabbinic context. Have you ever played the telephone game, right? You go around the room, you whisper in one person's ear. Everybody whispers in the next person's ear.

[19:04] By the end, it's completely different what was said at the beginning. I find some skeptics think Christianity is like the telephone game. The early Christians whispered something in their ear like Jesus died.

And by the time it got around the room at the other end, it was Jesus rose from the dead. And it's just not historically valid. That is an absurd analogy here.

And one way to appreciate that is to go back to the context of the rabbinic teaching. See, Paul says here, what I received, I passed on to you as a first importance.

That is formal rabbinic language. It is the language of a rabbi and student. In the ancient Jewish context, when the student receives teaching, they guard that teaching.

They do not innovate. They do not spin. They just guard that teaching and pass it on to the next disciple. So the same teaching will be passed on faithfully. And that's what Paul is doing here.

[20:03] Now, same language he uses in 1 Corinthians 11. I praise you for remembering me and everything and holding to the teachings just as I passed them on to you. For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you.

So time and again, Paul is formed in a rabbinic Jewish context where you faithfully pass on teaching. Now, you really see this in Galatians again, where he talks about even if I or an angel from heaven should give you a different gospel than the one you have received, let him be accursed.

In other words, you do not change the teaching that you received. You faithfully pass it on. You have a moral commitment. And from a Jewish context, you have a high intellectual skill in order to secure and ensure that the teaching is, in fact, being faithfully passed on.

So that's the first thing from 1 Corinthians 15, that the teaching here is being faithfully passed on. It's not being changed or developed. Second is the teaching itself.

The hard is that, first of all, Jesus died and was buried. Now, it doesn't reference specifically the crucifixion of Jesus. But, of course, there's no historical question that Jesus was crucified.

[21 : 13] That was the mode of death. In 1986, the Journal of the American Medical Association posted an article, published an article titled, On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ by Medical Professionals.

You can actually find this in PDF form online. It's a really interesting read. And I'm just going to read the summary of the abstract for the article. So, Jesus of Nazareth underwent Jewish and Roman trials, was flogged, and was sentenced to death by crucifixion.

The scourging produced deep, stripe-like lacerations and appreciable blood loss. And it probably set the stage for hypovolemic shock, as experienced by the fact that Jesus was too weakened to carry the crossbar, the patibulum, to Golgotha.

At the site of crucifixion, his wrists were nailed to the patibulum. And after the patibulum was lifted onto the upright post, his feet were nailed to the sites. The major pathophysiologic effect of crucifixion was an interference with normal respirations.

Accordingly, death resulted primarily from hypovolemic shock and exhaustion asphyxia. Jesus' death was ensured by the thrust of a soul to a spirit to his side.

[22 : 26] Modern medical interpretation of the historical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead when taken down from the cross. Now, I'm not saying all of that is explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15.

But the majority of that gives you a picture of what crucifixion was like. And if you've seen The Passion of the Christ, you have a pretty vivid depiction of what crucifixion was like in the ancient Roman world.

The word excruciating comes from excrucis, or out of the cross. To have the most excruciating physical torment and pain is an image of coming from the cross.

It should not surprise us, then, that this was a shameful, shocking way to die in the ancient Roman world. Imagine a person today having an electric chair around their neck.

A horrible way to die today. That was the kind of psychological shock of people wearing crosses around their necks. Deuteronomy 21 also talks about this shame.

[23 : 32] If a man is committed a sin worthy of death, he is executed, and you must hang his body on a tree. Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.

When Jesus was crucified, hung in a tree, he was believed to be under God's curse. It was a shameful, horrific, shocking way to be tortured and then killed.

And yet, somehow, this message, which originated in Jerusalem in the 30s, is presented by Paul and others as good news. In fact, the greatest possible news.

What explains the complete transformation of the view of the death of Jesus? It comes in the very next point, that he was raised on the third day.

The tomb, by implication, was found empty. Now, again, the text doesn't explicitly say the tomb was found empty. But we have to appreciate what raised meant for a first century Jew.

[24 : 36] See, Jesus talks about this accepted teaching of a future resurrection. He says, I tell you, a time is coming and has now come, and the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

This is the teaching of first century Jews, the Pharisees in particular, that there would be a future general resurrection. The resurrection would be physical and bodily.

The body that was laid in the tomb would come back to life and leave the tomb. And this is the language and the concept that is at the heart of this proclamation that he was raised. At Gergatai, he was raised, means that Jesus physically, bodily came back to life.

The resurrection that was expected at the end of history had now broken into the middle of history in the miracle of Jesus. And if he was physically, bodily raised back to life, the tomb by implication was left empty.

So that is a third claim that is at the heart of this message. And then this one. How did they come to know that he was raised? Well, because he was seen by followers and skeptics.

[25 : 40] He appeared to Kephias, that is Peter. And then to the 12th. I mean, we have here in the Gospels, in the New Testament, that the initial shock and dissolution of the apostles, embarrassing facts, and yet something transformed them, again, into viewing the death of Jesus as the greatest of good news.

And the answer is because he appeared to them. Amazingly, he then appears to James and then to all the apostles. And I want to highlight the significance of James, because this is James, the brother of Jesus, to whom he appeared.

And James later became a leader of the church in Jerusalem and was martyred under his faith, probably in the year 62, if we can use the dating of the Jewish historian Josephus. So James was a leader of the church in Jerusalem.

But we read in the book of Mark, when his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said he is out of his mind. John 7, 5, even his own brothers did not believe in him.

Now, historians say that there is something called the criterion of embarrassment, which means if a fact is embarrassing to your cause, that makes it more likely that it's true, because you wouldn't include it unless it were true, because it's embarrassing.

[26 : 53] And this is embarrassing. It's embarrassing that the family of Jesus and the brothers of Jesus did not believe in his ministry during his life. And because it's an embarrassing detail, it makes the testimony in Mark and John very credible.

It is, in fact, true that his brothers didn't believe in him during his life. And yet, we read that James became a leader of the church in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus.

That shocking death, that shameful death. And the answer as to why that happened is clearly presented here. He became a leader. He started to believe in his brother because he saw his brother raised from the dead.

And then Paul says this. Last of all, he appeared to me as the one abnormally born. So that's verse 8. So that verse is not in the original teaching he received, but he's adding this. But this does raise another amazing historical fact, that something changed the apostle Paul.

Even the most skeptical scholars admit that Paul was one of the great early persecutors of the church, as Saul, and that he was transformed. And you have to ask, what transformed Paul? He will tell you himself.

[28 : 02] He saw Jesus raised. That's what changed Paul from persecutor to disciple. And now the last fact I want to look at briefly is that the teaching about Jesus, that he died for their sins, that he was raised, that he was seen, this teaching did not originate in Rome or Antioch or Alexandria or Tarsus or some other further flung region of the Roman Empire.

It originated in Jerusalem. Now we know that Paul came up to Jerusalem in 37 and received by that time, if not earlier, that teaching.

These core claims originated in Jerusalem and radiated out through the empire from that point.

Which, of course, begs the question, if it were not true, you could have easily corroborated, right, that it was not true.

So with that in mind, I want to briefly take a look at different historical explanations. How can we explain the evidence, the data that we have in 1 Corinthians 15?

Some people have said, well, it's legend. You just wait long enough, like the telephone game, you go around, and eventually you get Jesus being raised from the dead. There are multiple problems with the legend hypothesis.

[29 : 19] As we've already seen, one problem is that the rabbinic context meant you don't innovate teaching, you faithfully pass it on. Paul said, again, even if I am an angel from heaven, should change, should teach something different than what you have received, let him be accursed.

Another problem with legend is there's just not enough time. Legend takes decades to develop. The teaching about Jesus originated within a couple of years of his death and was already in Jerusalem at the time.

Another problem with legend, pretty clearly, is that legends happened a long time ago, far, far away. This happened in Jerusalem and was being proclaimed in Jerusalem.

Legend is not a plausible explanation of 1 Corinthians 15 and the origin of the Christian proclamation. Another explanation some people have said is, well, maybe they went to the wrong tomb.

They found an empty tomb, and that became the source of this teaching that is in 1 Corinthians 15, but they were just wrong. Of course, that's ridiculous because, first of all, it's ridiculous to think that they wouldn't be able to figure out which tomb Jesus had been buried in.

[30 : 32] Other sources in the New Testament identify it as the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a public figure. But also, once they began teaching and proclaiming that Jesus had been raised, the Jews and Romans would have right away shut them down and said, no, his body's right here.

And another problem with the wrong tomb hypothesis, if you go into a tomb and you see that there's no body there, your first assumption is not going to be Jesus was supernaturally raised. It was

going to be, oh, I guess this isn't the tomb.

So the wrong tomb hypothesis also doesn't work. Some people have suggested something called the swoon theory that says, well, okay, Jesus, he didn't die on the cross.

He passed out, but then he was revived in the tomb. Well, again, this is just not a good hypothesis at all. So first of all, we know the enormous trauma from that article I referenced from the Journal of the American Medical Association, the incredible trauma that one experiences in crucifixion.

There's another problem as well, which is that even if Jesus had survived, which would be a miracle in and of itself, he would not have inspired anybody to think there was a miraculous resurrection.

[31 : 42] He would have come out just with his back in shreds and nail scars and blood caked all over him. Even if he could have survived the resurrection, he wouldn't have inspired belief, or sorry, if he had survived the crucifixion, he would not have inspired belief in a supernatural resurrection.

Some people have said maybe it was a conspiracy. Maybe the disciples all just made this up. Maybe Paul was in on the conspiracy. There's just no evidence for this. And there's also no motivation for it.

Why would they invent this conspiracy? We know what Paul experienced in his life. We know that he was martyred for his faith. You don't be martyred for your faith if that faith is a lie.

This leads to another claim people have made. Maybe they had visions, grief hallucinations. Well, there are multiple problems here, but one problem is if you have a vision, you can interpret that as a vision, not a supernatural resurrection.

Stephen references a vision in Acts chapter 7. He has a vision of Jesus as he's being stoned. They knew the difference between a vision and a physical bodily resurrection.

[32 : 56] And what happened to them was a physical bodily resurrection. And again, if they had started proclaiming the gospel based upon visions, well, the Jesus and Romans would have simply produced the body and shut down this emerging movement.

The only explanation that can most satisfactorily explain all of 1 Corinthians 15, 3 to 7 or 3 to 8, is the resurrection of Jesus. This explanation has unparalleled explanatory scope, meaning it explains all the facts, and also explanatory power.

It explains all of these facts in a very effective, efficient way. So I believe, based upon the historical evidence of 1 Corinthians 15, that the best explanation is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

And keep in mind, this is just one passage from one epistle in the New Testament. We could spend a lot of time looking at other epistles and looking at the gospels in particular for further historical evidence.

We could also look at evidence from extra-biblical sources, including Josephus. So we've had a very limited scope here today. But just to bring this time now we have to conclusion, there are two ways, again, you can have a belief in Jesus and his resurrection, which is foundational to the Christian faith, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, 14.

[34 : 18] You can have faith by simply trusting in him and in the experience of Jesus in your life and reading scripture and the testimony of the church. But you can also have that faith by doing historical investigation.

And I believe that if you do, an objective, unbiased person investigating all of the information, all of the available historical evidence, can draw the reasoned conclusion that the best explanation is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this truth that you have entered history through your son Jesus, that he lived, that he died an atoning death, and that through your power, he had a glorious resurrection.

And that resurrection is, yes, a matter of faith, but it is also a matter of evidence. It is a matter of historical investigation, that the proclamation of the church is not one that is opposed to our minds, reason, evidence, but in fact, finds common agreement and complement with reason and evidence and scientific or historical investigation and that you do not ask us to turn our brains off when we become disciples, but rather you do engage us as you call us in all matters to love you with all our hearts, soul, minds, and strength.

May we be faithful to that call today. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.