

The word of God will prosper

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Date: 09 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, now we have you two, God's blessing. Let us turn back to that portion of Scripture which we read together in the book of Acts in chapter 12. I want us to take a bit of an overview of the whole passage this evening, but we can take our text from verse 24.

We read, But the word of God increased and multiplied. The word of God increased or literally the word of God grew and multiplied.

One of the questions that Christians will often ask is, How is the word of God going to grow? We might not phrase it like that, but in reality that's what we're asking.

How is the church going to survive? How is the gospel going to prosper? How is God going to add to his church daily such as should be saved?

How is he going to do that in our dark day? How can Christianity again gain a foothold in our country? How can it make progress in a world which appears to us to be so evidently against it?

[1 : 11] Well, in light of these questions, I think that there are few chapters in Scripture which we'll find to be more encouraging for us as this chapter. And I want to study this chapter this evening with you and to see what the Lord is saying to us through it and to see how he himself is answering these questions and calling us to consider them.

And the first thing that I want to notice here is that in this chapter we see a church which is persecuted. We read in the first verse that, about that time, Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

Now, since the days of Stephen's martyrdom, which you'll remember, the church had enjoyed relative peace. She had liberty to preach the gospel and to make disciples.

She had freedom, basically, to worship as she pleased. But now, Herod Agrippa I, that is the grandson of the misnamed Herod the Great, he changes all that.

Herod Agrippa I, he reigned over Judea and Samaria for around seven years. And because of his close friendship with the man who was then the emperor of Rome, he was a powerful man and he was influential.

[2 : 31] And what we find here at the beginning of this chapter is that this powerful leader, that he stretches out his hand to harass the church.

He uses the power that he has to vex the body of Christ. And we read that he captures James, the son of Sebedee, that's one of Jesus' inner circle, one of the three pillars of the church, and he puts him to the sword.

In all likelihood, he beheaded him, just like his uncle beheaded John the Baptist. Tradition tells us that when James was beheaded, that the soldier who was keeping, the Roman soldier who was keeping guard over him, that he was so impressed by his demeanor and by his faith, that he himself was converted, and that he himself professed faith right there and right then, and that he himself, the guard, was then swiftly beheaded alongside James.

He died a martyr very quickly after believing the gospel. But I want to ask, well, why did Herod do this? Why did he behead James?

Why did he decide at this time to persecute the church? Well, we're told that when he saw that this, what he did, when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he decided to arrest Peter as well.

[3 : 55] So it's likely that even in James' own execution, that Herod was trying to get the Jews on side, as it were. He did what he did in order to satisfy the anti-Christian mob, those who didn't like the way things were going, those who didn't like the way that the gospel was prospering, especially those who didn't like that the gospel was going to the Gentiles.

The previous two chapters tell us how, through Peter's ministry, the household of Cornelius, who was a Gentile man, how that household was converted and received the Spirit of God.

People weren't happy with this. The Jews weren't happy about this. And as a result, you've got these high-powered Jews, and they're whispering in Herod's ear, and they're urging him on, and they're saying, hey, you've got to do something about this.

Just as people in their own day, with their own agenda, whisper in the ears of the state, whisper in the ears of those who've got power, and urge them on towards evil, against Christ and against his church.

What you have here then, friends, is the different forces of evil, the different powers of darkness, and they're coming together, and they're joining forces against the church.

[5 : 14] The rulers of the earth are setting themselves, and they're taking counsel together against the Lord and his anointed. And we kind of come to expect that from earthly kingdoms.

We come to maybe anticipate it from worldly empires. No, we shouldn't. They are ordained by God, and so they should serve God, just as the church ought to serve God. The state, the Scottish government, the SNP in Westminster, the conservatives in, sorry, the SNP in Hollywood, and the conservatives in Westminster, they are just as accountable before God as the free churches, or the free church continuing, or whoever it might be.

We are accountable before God. So are they. But we've come to expect that worldly empires and powers, that although they are ordained by God, that their purposes are going to be directly contrary to the purposes of God.

We've come to expect that, because that's what we see, isn't it? It's often the case, and more so perhaps in our day, that they want sovereignty, not only over men's bodies, but over their souls. Not only over what they do, but over what they say, and even over what they think. They want lordship over these things. And they want not only the respect of their subjects, but they want their unmitigated support in everything that they do.

[6 : 42] And you know, friends, often Christians, as Christians, we can't do that, can we? We can't in good conscience cheer an ungodly regime, or an ungodly agenda.

And you know, we find ourselves having to ask ourselves these questions today. Because we find that the prerogatives of our state, and those who are pushing the agendas in our government, and in society at large, that these prerogatives are so often out of sync with the prerogatives of our God. And you know, although the state must never lose our respect, and in many ways our support, and I emphasize that, we can't give any state unqualified allegiance.

Because there are certain things that they might ask us to do, which we just won't be able to do in good conscience. And there are certain things that they'll ask us not to do. And we'll feel, well, we can't not do these things.

And the result of all that will almost certainly be persecution in one form or another. when a state, when a nation comes away from the gospel, from its foundations, from the word of God.

[7 : 57] And friends, we're beginning to see that already, aren't we? We've been seeing it perhaps for a number of years in our own nation. We're seeing it more and more, even in these last few weeks. Whatever you think of Franklin Graham, his preaching, his doctrine, his politics, his personality, whatever you think of the man, the fact is that he's been barred not only from places in England, but also from the SECC in Glasgow.

Why? Well, because he holds to biblical principles. Biblical principles on things like the LGBT movement, movement, and homosexuality, and Islam, and numerous other things.

And he's been barred by the Glasgow City Council, and by those who are in authority. And not only has he been barred, but the reason given is that some of the things that he might preach, some of the things that he might say, could be deemed to be illegal.

That is the Christian doctrines, the Christian positions on these moral subjects, to preach them in public, in a public building, paid for by the taxpayer, might be seen to be against the law.

And this is in our nation. This is in the land of the book, apparently. And you know, if things continue to go the way that they are going, as it looks like they will, things are going to get a whole lot worse.

[9 : 33] And all of this is going to come a lot closer to home. It's a similar kind of thing that we find here. The state is pressing in on the church, taking away from it its liberties.

And look who they're partnering with. They're partnering with the Jews, aren't they? With the Jews. The Old Testament church, the ancient people of God, the people of the covenant.

And here they are, and they're raging against God. Here they are, the Jewish people, the Hebrews, and they're together, they're plotting the downfall of God's kingdom. And you know, friends,

persecution can come from the most unexpected of places, can't it?

It can even come from within the church. You saw perhaps, with regards to the Franklin Graham issue, you saw that one of the loudest of voices against him, who even formed a petition to stop him coming, was a minister of the Church of Scotland.

A man called the Reverend Brian Kerr, a minister in Lanark. And these things are fearful. These things make you shudder. A man who stands today, I'm sure, and speaks in the name of God, calling for another who speaks in the name of God not to be able to speak.

[10:56] And yet it's nothing new. There's nothing new under the sun. We find the exact same kind of thing in the book of Acts, and so we shouldn't be surprised to see it in our own day. And you know, friends, the devil is perhaps nowhere as active as he is in our churches.

He speaks in no name as often as he speaks perhaps in the name of Christ. And he appears in no guise as habitually as he does appear as an angel of light.

So let's not be surprised if we see that sometimes it's the churches or those who speak in the name of God who are halting the progress of the gospel. It happens.

Ministers have been forced out of their jobs by other ministers for holding to the historic truths of the faith. Things like the resurrection, like the virgin birth, justification by faith, the inerrancy of God's word.

You go back further, and I'm just talking about Scotland here. You go back further and you've got people even in their own island and they're forced to worship in the outdoors because they believe that Christ is the head of the church.

[12:05] Indeed, you've got someone that they're going to the stake to die a martyr's death. Why? Because they're refusing to accept that the state should have control over our church.

And they die for it in Scotland. We need to understand these things, friends. We need to remember them. We need to be ready for them if they're to come our way again.

But these things are discouraging, aren't they? They are discouraging. They're greatly disheartening for us today as a church to see what's happening, to see the days that have gone by and to see that they have gone by and that this is now where we find ourselves in a completely different position in many ways in a day of small things.

And you put yourself in the position of this church, a young church in Judea in the Book of Acts. And how are they feeling? Well, James, the prodigious spokesman of the church up to this point, he's been silenced.

He's been put to death. And then you've got Peter, the great apostle of the Jews, the great preacher on the day of Pentecost. He's imprisoned. And he's expected to lose his life on the morrow.

[13:21] King Herod is here with all authority. And he's here with all power. And he's virtually unstoppable from a human perspective. And, you know, again, we perhaps see things in the UK in a similar light.

Things are going downhill. Things are becoming perilous for some people. And our own state appears to be actively moving towards in some places the vilifying and the persecuting of true Christianity.

Not false Christianity. They don't mind that. They quite like it. But true Christianity. And you find now that the teachings which were formerly commonplace, they've moved from being commonplace to being taboo, to being almost impermissible.

And you find that Christians have moved from being accepted, or even the norm in a sense, in a cultural sense, to being accepted, to being tolerated, to being insufferable.

What next? Illegal? Well, maybe. But friends, it's moving quickly. And things are far more dangerous today than we could have expected that they would have been five years ago.

[14:28] More progress has been made by the purge of ungodliness in our nation and in the Western world than we could have anticipated. And they'll stop at nothing until the true church has been silenced and until real Christianity has been ostracized and marginalized and obliterated.

And in many ways, like the church of old, the odds are stacked against us and we stand, as it were, defenseless because we're divided in ourselves, are we not?

Fighting amongst ourselves like little children. And even if we weren't, we're still completely outnumbered. We don't have the power nor the authority to stop the incoming tide of persecution. What do we do? What can we do? Well, what did the church in the Book of Acts do? They could have attacked that prison where Peter was kept.

They could have attacked it with clubs and with daggers. They could have fought fire with fire. But you see, there was a weapon available to them which was greater than any sword.

[15:40] We read here in verse 5 that Peter was kept in prison but earnest prayer or constant prayer or ceaseless prayer for whom was made to God by the church.

You see, in light of the fires that were raging around them, all that they could do was pray. But what a thing to do. What a thing to do to pray.

In their weakness they went to the one who had strength. In their powerlessness they went to the Lord God omnipotent who reigns. And in their utterly, in their utter inability to change the situation, where do they go?

Well, they go to the one who can change it. They go to the Lord himself. Constant prayer was offered for Peter. Prayer without ceasing was offered on his behalf.

They prayed for this man. They prayed for his movies. They prayed for his safety. They prayed for his continuance in ministry. But they weren't just praying for a man. They were praying for what the man stood for.

[16:49] They were praying for the gospel that he preached. Their desire was to see the word of God grow and to increase and to multiply for it to prosper in the souls of men.

And Peter, well, Peter had been instrumental in that regard, hadn't he? His preaching had been blessed by God. His ministry had been accompanied by the Spirit of God.

Souls were being saved. The kingdom of God was being extended. Christ's dominion was being advanced. And this is what they were praying for, the continuance of this, the furtherance of this.

That's what the church prayed for without ceasing. As they got together as a group, as they all went to this one house, the house of the mother of John, a son named Mark, they prayed for him.

And they prayed for the breaking down of any barriers which stood in the way of Peter preaching his gospel and that gospel going out and bringing back fruit.

[17:51] That was their duty. That was their responsibility. That's what they did. They prayed.

What's our duty? What's our duty in light of what's happening in our nation, in light of what's happening in our communities with the apathy and with the challenges to the church and to its stances?

What's our duty? Well, we are to be steadfast and immovable and always abounding in the work of the Lord. Yes, certainly. We're to ensure that we are obeying God before we are obeying men.

We're to ensure that we're standing up for the truth, that we're speaking words in season, that we're living faithfully. We're to pray. Ah, but we must pray too.

Primarily, we must pray. First and foremost, we must be on our knees. In many ways, this is the most important thing that we can do. Friends, in many ways, the prayer meeting is the most important place that we can be.

In many ways, and I'm not being black and white in this, but in many ways, it's the most important meeting of the week. Not demeaning in any way the preaching of the word, but in certain ways, oh, that's where we need to be.

[19:07] Where the Lord's people are joining in prayer together and pleading for the church and the community and the nation. That's where we ought to be. You know, the children of Israel's redemption from Egypt began when?

When did it begin? When God heard their groans and their cries, their prayers. Are we groaning? Do we see anything to groan about?

Are we too comfortable to groan? Are we too blind to cry out in need? Do we see our danger? Do we see the urgency of our situation?

There's a man who's involved in politics and who knows much more about these things than I do. But he says that if things continue the way that they are going in our nation with regards to the clamping down against Christianity, that they'll be locking up our doors in ten years.

He said that nine years ago. Sorry, one year ago he said that. Nine years time, he says, they'll be locking up our doors unless we confirm or sign up to some sort of code of conduct and values that the state has agreed with.

[20:24] Now you can write that off if you will. But if I told you five years ago that somebody was going to be banned from preaching in a public place in our country because he held to the historic truths of Christianity, you probably wouldn't have believed me either.

And I might not have believed myself. Friends, it's urgent. Are we crying out to God with that urgency for him to do something about it, to remember his cause in our country?

And when we're praying, is our prayer constant? Is it perhaps a quick prayer when you're sitting in the pew, a quick prayer when you remember, or are we praying earnestly? Are we praying without ceasing?

Are we pleading with the Lord? That's our duty today, to pray. But friends, in this instance, we see not only a church persecuted and a church praying, but quite remarkably, given the context, we see a church growing, don't we?

The word of God grew and multiplied. You see, when a faithful people, when they constantly implore God to do his will and further his cause, when a faithful people dedicate themselves to prayer without ceasing, God will act.

[21 : 46] He will. He'll do it not in our time, he'll do it in his own time. But in his own time, he will tear down the citadels of Satan. He will not be mocked. He will cause his church to grow.

Friends, he does it in impossible situations. This was an impossible situation here. Our situation in Scotland today, it seems impossible. But things weren't as bad yet today as they were in the first century.

Things aren't as far gone now as they were then. Our Christian leaders aren't being executed. Our Muslim ministers aren't being imprisoned. Christians aren't going from alley to alley, from street to street, from door to door in fear of their lives.

Not yet. But they were in the first century. This is the day in which the church was living. This is the society and the circumstances in which they were operating.

These are the possibilities that they were facing. This is the current that they were swimming against. And to all intents and purposes, the church in Judea was going to die out. It was going to become extinct.

[22 : 58] If you were an impartial observer of the church at this time, that's a conclusion that you'd come to. But you see, what impartial observers of the church don't bear in mind and what men like Herod don't factor in is the God factor.

The fact that God rules and that he overrules in history, in the history of his church, in the history of his world. The fact that God is building his church so that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The fact that he's working all things together for the good of his church and for the glory of his Christ, he's doing that. But you know, friends, you can only grasp this if you look at the big picture. If you look at the thing, as it were, through a wide lens. Because as the church sits in Mary's house praying, this doesn't seem to be the case, not at all.

The gates of hell seem to be prevailing. The powers of evil appear to be in the ascendancy. They do. But I want you to see here how bit by bit, stage by stage, God turns that around.

[24 : 12] How he turns a hopeless situation into one of great joy and wonder for the people of God. How he transforms a position of almost certain defeat into one of glorious victory for the church.

And the transformation begins with Peter's miraculous escape from prison. I don't have time to go through it, but we find that not from any ingenuity of his own, not that any ingenuity of his own would have got him out of there, but he manages to escape.

He's bound with two chains and he's between two soldiers who are probably chained to him. And you've got another two soldiers who are keeping the door. And all in all, you've got four squads assigned to the task, four quaternions.

That is four groups of four soldiers. And as well as that, you've got two guard posts and you've got a large iron gate which is bolted shut. And if Peter is going to escape from the prison before his trial and before his almost certain execution, that's what he needs to get through.

He needs to escape from Alcatraz, as it were. And of course, he's got no intention of trying to escape, trying to break out of jail. And said, what does Peter do? Peter sleeps.

[25 : 30] Falls asleep. It's amazing what a clear conscience and a strong confidence in God can do for your sleep. But when he's asleep, the angel of the Lord prods him on his side.

He wakes him up. He gets him up. He loosens his chains and he walks him past the guards who are asleep in a God-given slumber.

And then when he approaches the final hurdle with the great iron gate, the gate opens of its own accord and he walks through with the angel by his side. He thinks he's dreaming and he finds himself in a steep and he turns around and he's alone.

He's by himself. And he kind of comes to himself, doesn't he? And he makes his way to Mary's house where the church had gathered, where the people are literally praying for him. The prayer meeting is literally underway. And after a bit of confusion and after a bit of unbelief, he's standing before the church which was praying for him.

[26 : 33] And he's telling them in the midst of all of their astonishment how God delivered them out of Herod's hand. What an answer to prayer before their very eyes.

What a manifestation of the power of God and the weakness of Herod. Small victory. Maybe we're beginning to see small victories in our own country.

I don't know. It depends on the way that you read Providence. Maybe the kingdom of darkness is starting to show its cracks and to show its weaknesses. But God deals with the symptom, as it were, the symptom of Peter's imprisonment.

And he encourages the church in doing that. But there's a bigger problem and God comes to deal with that problem. Because as great as Peter's deliverance was, it was only a partial deliverance for the people of God.

Because the enemy, Herod, Herod is still looking to vex the people of God, isn't he? The persecuted is still at large. The church is still in danger.

[27 : 37] But you know, having shown the weakness of Herod's regime, God is now going to show the weakness of Herod himself. We see that in verses 21 to 23.

On an appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne and delivered an oration or a speech to the people. And the people were shouting the voice of a God and not of a man.

And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory. And he was eaten of worms and breathed his lusts. It's quite remarkable, isn't it?

Almost unbelievable. Interestingly, in that regard, Josephus, who was the great first century and I think into the second century again, Jewish historian, he records this same story.

And when he tells the story, he tells us that Herod Agrippa, that he held a great feast for the emperor, I think. The emperor had returned from the UK, actually, and he'd returned to Rome.

[28 : 43] And this feast was held for his return. As he stood up to speak at the feast, that the sun shone upon his silver clothing and reflected light of his clothing.

And the people who, as you see from verse 21, had reason to flatter him, they began to do that.

Verse 20, sorry. They began to say that this was God and not a man.

They began to flatter him in order that he might favor them and that he might be good to them. This is a God. They praised him as a God. And Herod said nothing about it.

He took it. He perhaps enjoyed it. Just at that point, Herod, Josephus says that he looked up and he saw a crow. He saw a crow fly past.

And immediately he knew that he was going to die. This was a bad sign. And there's a story behind that as well, which I don't have time to go into. But immediately he fell with a pain in his stomach.

[29 : 43] And the moment he fell, he confessed to those around him. He was, I do remember, he confessed that this had happened to him because he hadn't rejected the blasphemy. Because he had been a blasphemous man.

And Josephus says he didn't die straight away. He died five days later. And this historical record is perfectly compatible with Luke's biblical record.

We have to remember, friends, that all that we read in the Bible is history. And any secular history that has ever been dug up or of the same time, it always confirms what we have here.

And this is what happened. You see, Herod wasn't just harassing the church. He was also, he was lifting himself up against God. And this is proof of it.

The people made him out to be more than he was and he accepted it. He entertained it. He enjoyed it. And for that blasphemy, and for the blasphemy which was his opposition against Christ's church, God knocks him down.

[30 : 48] No less than an angel of the Lord himself was an agent of it, but no more than worms were the instrument of it. A great power brings a humiliating disease.

This apparently great man is ended by maggots, ended with great shame. Oh, friends, God rules and he overrules, does he not?

And here he turns darkness into light for the church and he turns defeat into victory in a matter of days. He's allowed the church to weep in order that she might all the more rejoice.

He's allowed things to get very low in order that his power and his control over every circumstance and every situation might be made manifest to his church.

He's making it obvious to his church, isn't he? That their God is a living God. That he's an active God. That he's a powerful God. That he's a God who cares for his church.

[31 : 46] Who upholds his church. Who loves his church. And the cause and the mission that he has given to them. And he's showing this church much more than anybody who resists him.

And anybody who seeks to shackle the church, no matter how great they might be, no matter how powerful they might seem, they will not prosper.

a man's pride will bring him low and whoever exalts himself shall be abased.

And you'll notice that God brings his victory to pass bit by bit. He doesn't do it all at once. Peter is delivered before Herod is cut off. The small victory precedes the great victory.

And in all of these things, God is teaching his church, isn't he? He's instructing his people. He's educating them in the school of providence. He's teaching them to pray.

[32 : 45] Teaching them to trust in himself and depend upon himself. He's teaching them to cast all of their cares upon him. And in all of these things, God is lifted up very high.

And this world's power has come to be seen in perspective. And friends, I suppose the great application of this is just this, that we worship the same God.

We seek to serve the same Lord. And he's teaching us tonight to see not the same lessons. When we see evil prevailing, he's teaching us to pray and to trust in him and to view all of these things in the biblical perspective.

He's reminding us that he is sovereign, that evil will not ultimately prevail, that the church shall not ultimately be obliterated, that the proud shall not triumph, the enemy shall not succeed.

The gods of this world will come to nothing. Over time, the gods of the state, of government, of political parties, of ideologies and philosophies, the LGBT movement, the extinction rebellion movement, all of these things would seek to overturn the norms of God.

[34 : 03] And they will fall flat on their faces because they've dishonored God. God, friends, will always have the victory. He will.

He might chastise the church before he brings the church to that victory. He might make the church to be a very small remnant before she sees it. But the church will always overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

And oh for us then to be on the side of the God of providence, the one who reigns triumphant over space and over time. That's what we long for.

That's what we seek for. So, this remarkably short verse, and yet powerful version 24, it sums up the whole thing, doesn't it?

But the word of God grew and multiplied. What an encouragement to the church in every age. And how much more encouraging it is in this context.

[35 : 02] How brightly this star shines against the dark backdrop. The word of God could not be shackled. Does God not say through Isaiah, my word shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I praise.

and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. Like a boomerang, as it were, it always comes back. And it always comes back having accomplished that which it was sent to do.

Isn't that an amazing thing? It is always a savor of life unto life to some and of death unto death to others. But whatever it's doing, it's always doing God's work. Whether it's read, whether it's preached, it's forever active in these solemn things, softening and hardening, justifying and condemning, building up and knocking down, the word of God grew and multiplied.

And God's word will always grow and multiply because God will have it to do just that. Herod, great Herod, he was brushed out of the way just like that so that the word could grow and so that it could continue to grow.

so that the gospel could continue to spread not only in Judea but all over the world, even to her part of the world. You know friends, God will continue to brush aside kings and governments and empires and peoples and groups and agencies and movements that stand against him and they might appear to prevail for a time as they appear to be prevailing in our own country.

[36 : 44] they might afflict the Lord's people and vex the church while they have power but God will make way for his word. He will friends.

He will make it to grow and he will make his church to multiply. So what can we do? What must we be doing as Christians, as a church?

Well, we have to view things in perspective, certainly with a biblical perspective. We have to understand that history is his story. We have to remember that even in the darkness that God is working and that his word will prosper, that it will save, that it will prevail.

But it's one thing to talk about the word, about what it can do, about how it can change the world, but you know the best way to defend a lion is to allow the lion to defend himself, to open the cage, to allow him to use his own power.

And so we must unleash the word of God. Unleash it. We must preach the word and be instant in season and out of season. Oh friends, the word is quick and powerful.

[37 : 58] It is sharper than any two-edged sword and so we must wield that sword. We must let it loose. We must speak words in season. We must let the word speak and God speak through it.

We must soak it in prayer. We must pray for it in our prayer meetings. Pray for the pulpit. Pray for the minister. Pray for those who witness for the truth.

Pray for those who take a stand for the truth in their everyday lives in parliament, wherever it may be. Friends, the word must be central.

God's gospel will prevail. Jesus Christ will be crowned victorious and the church will survive. It will. God has decreed it. But if our church is going to survive, if this congregation is going to survive, it will be through a very close adherence to the word of God.

let us then hold on to that word then. Let us believe in this word that this is what we need.

[39 : 11] Let churches grow and that revivals happen through preaching and prayer, not through any extraordinary means that we can create.

let us stand by the word. No matter what the cost is, let us pray over the word and let us trust that God will act through his word and that he will preserve his people and that he will vindicate them and that he will build up his church because the word of God will grow and will multiply where the Lord's people hold to it and commit themselves to the Lord in prayer in the midst of the situation in which they are living and in the midst of the situation in which we are living and I hope that that is what we will continue to do and trust that the Lord knows what he is doing and that he will keep us throughout anything that might be before us.

Amen. Let us pray.