

The Justice of Judgment

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[0 : 00] Well, it's very good to be with you tonight, a church full of beautiful people, obviously. Paul's asked me just to fill in for him while he's away, and I'm really glad to.

The Langham Preaching stuff is really wonderful. He and I together sort of coordinate things in Victoria for Langham Preaching, and you might really pray for that ministry. It's a very important ministry, and it's providing good teaching for pastors around the world now.

So please keep it in your prayers. It's a very worthwhile ministry to be praying for. Let's just pray that God might help us tonight. Father, we do thank you for your word, and we pray tonight that as we look at this part of Ezekiel together, that you would be with us, that you would enlighten us, that you would rebuke us and encourage us, and, Father, that you'd draw us into closer relationship with you, and that you would enable us to live rightly before you in your world.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it was just another Christmas. Brian had experienced 27 of them. Sorry, 47 of them.

And in many ways, for him, this Christmas was just like so many others. There were things to do, chores to do, gifts to buy, parents who needed to be driven to various things, places to go.

[1 : 25] But this year, everything seemed a little more tedious than it had. And in fact, Brian was having trouble concentrating. Brian's eyesight had been slowly deteriorating for years.

He had glasses for driving, glasses for reading. But this year, he found himself wearing them even more than he had in the past. But now, something was escalating for him.

You see, Brian was beginning to have dizzy spells. And then he began to see things in rooms in two different colours at the same time. You know, one eye would see the room as being grey, and the other eye would see the room as being peach coloured.

Within two months, Brian had a diagnosis. It had a long and technical name. But the long and the short of it was that he was about to lose his sight in one eye, and it was unrepairable.

And the other eye would need to be watched very closely. Now, that story is a real story. And, friends, I need to tell you that Brian's story is very, very common in our world.

[2 : 34] You see, all too often in our world, blindness is not congenital, nor is it necessarily caused by trauma. Often it's slow, and often it creeps up on you gradually.

In fact, sometimes blindness is so slow that you don't even know it's happening. And at other times, you recognise that something's wrong, but in your mind you sort of try and shut it out and ignore it. And at other times, your deteriorating eyesight is just so simply overwhelmed by the mundane that you don't notice it until it's far too late.

You see, friends, this story about blindness is not unlike our spiritual state. You see, this slow, creeping, gradual blindness that happens to people in our world actually gives us a wonderful insight into the situation in our world.

You see, friends, we live in a world of wonder, don't we? It is a world full of technology. It is a world full of overwhelming possibilities. A world where there is an absolute wealth of possible activities that might consume us.

[3 : 45] It is a world of work, of relationships, of recreation, of addictions. A world where all such things often crowd out any thought of God and of spiritual matters.

A world where we can often slowly become blind to God. Or a world that chooses to willfully become blind to God.

And in our world today, God has largely disappeared, hasn't he, from public discourse. God has largely disappeared from public conversation.

He's been squeezed out by the mundane matters of life. Or he's been willfully shut out. Because we have got our own gods. Or we are our own gods.

And we have shut God seemingly out of our destiny. So, friends, whether it is willful or high-handed or accidental, the truth is that spiritual blindness is a terrifying and terrible characteristic of the world that we inhabit.

[4 : 48] And such blindness is not just a modern problem. It is also a very ancient problem. And that is why the Bible often uses blindness to talk about spiritual matters.

And one of the places we do it, that God does it in the Bible, is in the very passage we look at tonight. So, I want you to open your Bibles and enter into this ancient world with me.

And I want you to hear the words that God says to the world through Ezekiel, his prophet. And the words he speaks, I think, are not words just for an ancient world. They are words for our world. They are words for us. They are God's words for any people in any age. So, let's get started. Open your Bibles, like I said, and turn with me to the book of Ezekiel.

And as we do this, let me explain what I'm going to do tonight. You see, the passage tonight covers three chapters. Now, we would be here till midnight if I went through all three chapters with you.

[5 : 46] And I don't want to keep you till midnight, and I don't want to be here till midnight speaking myself. So, what I intend to do tonight is to do just a few things. I intend to tell you four truths from these three chapters, well, from these three chapters and a couple of others from Ezekiel.

And they are truths that ancient Israel appears to have become blind and deaf to. And they are truths that I think our modern world has become blind and deaf to. And they are truths that even we here tonight may have come blind and deaf to.

So, let's get started and we'll look at the first truth. And to do this, you need to flip back a little bit to Ezekiel chapters 1 to 3. This is where this first truth comes. And I need to tell you this because I think the first three chapters of Ezekiel dominate the whole of the book.

I think those three chapters dominate these three chapters. And the writer wants us to understand that the rest of his book, including the ones the chapters we'll read tonight, are shaped by chapters 1 to 3.

So, let me refresh your mind as to what goes on in chapters 1 to 3. And have a look at them yourself. Just flip through and you'll see what goes on. Chapter 1 records an incredible vision of God by Ezekiel.

[7 : 00] There is this stormy wind that is coming through where he is. And verse 4 tells us that this wind comes from the north, is accompanied by a great cloud of brightness. And around it there is fire flashing to and fro continually.

That's verse 4. And the language of imagery is that of God arriving in incredible splendour. The mechanism of his arrival is described in terms of these great big wheels turning one upon the other. And these huge creatures that are awesome. The image is that of a huge chariot which represents the sort of throne of God. And there is God upon this chariot with these wheels moving upon each other.

With these huge creatures carrying it. Effortlessly God arrives on the scene. There born by his throne.

And in verses 26 and 27 Ezekiel apprehends God in human form. He recognises that. He's staring at the very glory of God himself.

[8 : 05] And he does the only appropriate thing. Look at it in verse 28. He falls on his knees before this God of all. This God who is real. This God who is holy. This God who is mobile and unrestrained by his world.

This God who oversees his world and the people wherever they are in this world. And chapters 2 and 3 will go on to tell us that this God knows his people. He knows their situation.

He's aware of their sin. And he's commissioning Ezekiel to confront them with their sin. Friends these chapters introduce us to a truth that we modern people have thought that we can do without. For that truth is that there is a God and that this God matters. There is a God and that this God matters.

That is why there's this constant refrain. Every now and then. Perhaps you heard it as we read chapter 12. There's this constant refrain through the book of Ezekiel. It is one which we often hear in the chapters. And God will say these words.

[9 : 07] Then they shall know that I am the Lord. Can you see what God is saying? His point is very clear. He's saying behind the world you inhabit there stands an eternal being.

And he is God. I am God. And I am not silent. And God is not absent either. He is there. It is just that we human beings often refuse to see him.

Or we refuse to listen to him. Friends do not be fooled by our world. The one true reality behind our world is that there is a God. God. And this God matters.

There is our first truth from Ezekiel. There is a God and he matters. Now let's turn to our chapters for tonight. So flip in your Bibles through to chapter 12. And our second truth comes from chapter 12 of Ezekiel.

Particularly verses 1 to 20. And I want to survey its content. But in order to do this I need to tell you what came immediately before. Flip back just before chapter 12. Into the last verse or two of chapter 11.

[10:09] And what happens there is that Ezekiel describes. Sorry, Ezekiel describes how he's seen God and his chariot yet again.

And he's heard God's message for his people. And in verse 25 he describes how he then goes and he tells all of the exiles away in Babylon. All the things that the Lord has shown him. And that then flips us into chapter 12.

And I want you to notice what happens in chapter 12. God gives his word again in chapter 1. In verse 1 of chapter 12. And his word is that the reaction of God's people to that word he's been told to give them.

Is to see but not see. To hear but not hear. It is to rebel against this God. It is to reject this God's word. And so God says well if that's the case.

Do some signs for them. And he engages in what I think is probably an ancient form of street theatre. He perhaps it's this. He thinks that or God thinks this innovative sort of dramatic portrayal of things will prompt questions and cut through their blindness.

[11:13] And the first sign is spelled out in verses 3 to 6. Do you remember when we read it? Ezekiel is to prepare a little sort of backpack. And there's pictures in ancient reliefs of this.

They're sort of little packs that you threw over your back. And he's to prepare this pack. And he's to act like one going off into exile. And yesterday I got a really good picture of this through a radio interview of a young Kenyan man who lived in a sort of shanty village during the race conflict that occurred in Kenya a couple of years ago.

And what this man did is he described how the adult men used to scour the village for young men from opposing tribes. And they would knock on the doors of their houses.

And if they found such young men they would beat them and they would often kill them. Well the day came when the rap rap rap came on his door.

Do you know what this young man did? He didn't go to the door. He dug through the wall of his hut and escaped. And that is what is going on here. Ezekiel gives this graphic display of such a thing.

[12:24] He digs a hole and he scrambles through it with his pack in the middle of the night. And he emerges out. And graphically he demonstrates the judgment of the coming exile on Jerusalem.

And he offers no word to its meaning. And so you can imagine here's this prophet sort of wandering around doing this strange street theatre. No one really knows what it means. And so they might have gone home that night thinking what is Ezekiel on about?

What is he doing? And they might have scratched their head all night. And they come back in the morning to see well what is it really on about? And in verse 17 and in verses 8 to 16 God gives an explanation to Ezekiel's piece of street theatre.

Can you see what he says? He tells them that what the people ask him about, when the people ask him about its meaning, he is to tell them that it's about the forthcoming judgment of the king of Israel.

And do you remember the little bit about him not seeing the land? When the king of Israel was attacked and Jerusalem was besieged. The very last things he saw before his eyes were cut out were his children killed in front of him.

[13:31] And then he was carted off into exile blind. And so Ezekiel has prophesied this very event happening. Anyway, in verse 17 he tells Ezekiel to engage in yet another piece of street theatre, another sign act.

He is to eat this meal in front of the people. And as he does so he is to sort of visibly quake and tremble in fearfulness. And dramatically he is to convey to the people that the judgment is coming and it's coming becoming because of their violence.

Friends, the truth that arises out of this passage and many others like it in Ezekiel is this. There is a right and a wrong way to live before God.

And in the light of a God who matters, there is a conduct that is right and there is a conduct that is wrong. And rebellion against God is wrong and violence against his people and the people of the world is wrong.

For God created humans for right relationship with God and with each other. And he called this nation to be the epitome of that lifestyle. And they have rebelled against God by refusing to hear and to see his will.

[14:40] And they have filled their cities, he says, with violence against each other. So there are the first two truths. Have you got the first one? There is a God and he matters. And what is the second? Before that God, there is a conduct that is right and there is a conduct that is wrong.

Now let's turn to the third truth. This one arises from Ezekiel 12 verse 31 through to chapter 13 verse 23. And I'm going to take a quick look at the content and explain it to you.

The first thing I want you to notice is that these verses fall into three sections. You might notice them there. There's verses 21 to 28. Then there's chapter 13 verses 1 to 16. And then the third is chapter 13, 17 to 23.

The next thing I want you to notice is that these verses share a common theme. I wonder if you heard it when we read through chapter 12. The common theme is prophecy and the prophetic word. The first section, if you can put it this way, is about right prophecy that is treated wrongly. And the second and the third sections are about wrong prophecy that is treated rightly.

[15:47] That's right. So let's have a look at the detail. Now verse 21 tells us that in Ezekiel's day, the people had a saying. In fact, they had two sayings.

What is the first saying? Well, the first one in verse 21 goes like this. The days are prolonged and every vision comes to nothing. And verse 26 has the next common saying.

And this one goes like this. The vision he sees is for many days ahead. He prophesies for distant times. Now when you put those two sayings together, what have you got?

You've got an overall tendency amongst the people of God. Can you see what that overall tendency is? When you put those two together, they want to say, we want to distance ourselves from God and his word.

On the one hand, they're saying, look, God's word cannot be trusted. He keeps sending these prophets. They keep speaking words, but they never come about really, do they? In other words, what they're really saying is God can't be trusted.

[16:44] His word can't be trusted. His prophets speak these words. They never come about. And they're saying, if God speaks, we cannot trust it.

And if you say that, you're saying God himself cannot be trusted. In other words, they're really saying God cannot be trusted. If you cannot trust God's word, you cannot trust him who speaks it, can you?

On the other hand, they're saying something else as well. Can you see what else they're saying? They're saying that God's word is not for them at this time. In other words, we can neglect it or we can push it aside as irrelevant.

It's not for us. So we don't really have to listen to it. Both amount to a pushing away of God's word, which amounts to a pushing away of God himself. And to push God's word away is to push God himself away.

For God's word tells us about God. And God's word conveys God to us. Chapter 13 tells us the other side. Have a look at it.

[17:46] If God's people want to distance themselves from God's word in chapter 12, do you know what chapter 13 says to us? Chapter 13 tells us they have some able accomplices.

You see, the first 16 verses of chapter 3 tell us about some false prophets. And their deceptive message can be summarised in one quick line. It's summarised in verse 10.

Have a look at it. They prophesy peace to God's people. In other words, can you see what they do? They cut against both two truths we've seen before.

You see, they indicate to God, these false prophets are saying to God's people, God does not really matter after all. And that your conduct does not really matter after all.

And so God is going to give you peace because he really doesn't care about those things too much. There is only health and wealth, peace and prosperity for you people.

[18 : 41] And verses 11 to 15 go on to say that saying such things to God's people is like putting a veneer of whitewash on a wall. It's like putting some very light plaster on a wall that will be washed away at the first rainfall.

Such prophecy is an awful deception. And it will be judged by God. And the final section on true and false prophecy runs from verses 17 to 23.

And verses 1 to 16 spoke about male prophets. And verses 17 to 23 talk about some women who acted like prophets. And it seems to say their manner of prophecy mixes some form of magic and divination and all those sorts of things.

And by doing such things they manipulated God and they exploited God's people. God's concern for his people can be seen by his constant repetition.

Look at verses 17 to 23 and see if you can see the phrase that occurs most often. Can you see it there? It is my people.

[19 : 50] Can you see it occurring over and over and over again? In verses 20 to 23 God acts on what he sees happening to his people and he pronounces judgment.

In verses 20 to 23 he promises judgment on these witches. And he will act in judgment on them just as he did in the male prophets in the first half of chapter 13.

So can you see what these two chapters do when they give us, when they're put together? They give us two alternative portraits. On the one hand, there is a God who wants truth for his people and sends prophets to announce it.

And on the other hand, there are those who want to draw people away from God's truth. So God's message is met by skepticism from the very people that he wants to speak truth to.

And it's met by people who want to assist people with their skepticism. By speaking a message of peace or seeking to manipulate God on their behalf. So let's see if we can summarize into our third truth.

[20 : 53] This has been a longer one. So what would the third truth be? Well the truth behind these verses I think is this. There is such a thing as theological truth and theological falsehood.

The word theology means things about God. So there are things about God that are true. And there is a teaching about God that is true. And there is a teaching about God, a theology that is false.

There is a theology that is right and a theology that is wrong. And the theology that is wrong has distinct characteristics. What does it do? It whitewashes truth.

Or it attempts to manipulate and tame God. And it seeks to aid people in distancing themselves from the discomfort of God's word. Friends, let me tell you there is no shortage in our modern world of people offering the very same things that were offered in Ezekiel's day.

There are those outsiders of the faith, those who are not Christian, the astrologers, the magicians, the necromancers, the self-help advocates, and a host of others who promise a way of avoiding truth and manipulating reality.

[22 : 06] They are in all our bookshops. They are in all our newspapers. They are in all our television programs. And their voices are loud and strong.

But the worst thing is that there are insiders as well. There are a host of false prophets in our churches today who promise peace when there is no peace.

Who offer prosperity without cost. Who offer discipleship without a cross. Who offer social gospel that does not have anything of the gospel in it really.

Or who offer relationship with God without the need for obedience. Or they offer a God who does not really care for sin. Friends, or care about sin.

Friends, our world is full of false theology. And our churches are full of false theology just as Ezekiel's world was. Beware of it.

[23 : 07] Wherever God's truth is, there will be forces of darkness trying to squash it or diminish it. And some will be very obvious and they'll stand out like beacons.

And some will be like their agent who disguises himself as an angel of light. So be on your guard. So there are the first three truths.

Can you remember them? There is a God and he matters. First, before such a God there is a conduct that is right and a conduct that is wrong. And the third one, before such a God there is a theology that is right and a theology that is wrong.

Let's now turn to our final truth and it runs in chapter 14. We've already had some hints of it in chapters 12 and 13. But it comes into full flower here in chapter 14. So let's have a quick run

through the chapter and see what it's about.

Well verse 1, some of the elders of Israel turn up and they want to have an interview with Ezekiel. And as they're having this interview, God gives this sort of, it's almost a secret whispered into his ear.

[24 : 12] He gives them a secret word. Or he gives Ezekiel a secret word. And what he says is, I've looked into their hearts, Ezekiel. And do you know what? Their hearts are full of idols.

I've looked into their hearts, the leaders of these people and found them full of idolatry. Hypocritically, they have come to you, the Lord's messenger, with their hearts focused not on me, the Lord, but on idols.

And God's word comes to God's prophet. And in verses 4 and 5, he announces judgment. And in verse 6, he says to all of Israel, turn back from idols.

Then again, he promises judgment. And verses 9 to 11 have him promising judgment again on false prophets. And in verses 12 to 20, he indicates that his long suffering is drawing to a close.

You see, his people have sinned from their very inception as his people. Do you remember when God is up on Mount Sinai giving the Ten Commandments to his people?

[25 : 16] Do you remember what his people were doing down the bottom of the mountain? They were making a golden calf. From the very day they were given his law, they have been breaking it. And time and time again, he has heard, he has put up with or heard righteous intercessors come to him.

Remember what Moses does when he goes down from the mountain. He says to God, please don't desert these people. And from that moment on, God's prophets have interceded for God's people as they have kept sinning.

But can you see what happens here? Here God promises that not even the most righteous intercessors amongst his people will save Israel from judgment this time.

He says, look, even if you had Noah and Daniel and Job here before me, even if they were present in the land, their righteousness would not be able to turn back my wrath.

And verse 21 indicates that God's wrath will come in the form of four deadly acts of judgment. Sword, famine, wild animals and pestilence.

[26 : 24] And yet even in such judgment, God will temper things with mercy. Even without intercessors, he will leave survivors. And those survivors will acknowledge what God has done is just.

These will acknowledge God's justice in judgment. As verse 23 says, they will know that it was not without cause that he did what he did. Friends, our first three truths were these.

Do you remember them? There is a God and he matters. Before such a God, there is a conduct that is right and a conduct that is wrong. Three, before such a God, there is a theology that is right and a theology that is wrong.

And our fourth arises out of those three. And it is this, that there are consequences for neglecting or avoiding or resisting the first three. Those truths, if they are avoided or resisted or neglected, will have an awesome fourth consequence.

And that consequence is a just judgment of God. You see, there are consequences for neglecting or avoiding or resisting God and his truth. And those consequences are just judgment.

[27 : 36] Friends, the notion of judgment in our modern world has much bad press, doesn't it? But Ezekiel is clear. God is God. God matters.

God is holy. God is concerned for his world. God is concerned for his people. Now I want you to ask yourself this. If God was not a God of judgment, what sort of God would he be?

If he did not act in judgment, what sort of God would he be? Well, the answer is crystal clear, isn't it? He would not be just if he did not judge. It would be like a society that said, we're not going to punish anyone for committing crime.

That would be an unjust society, wouldn't it? And God who did not act in judgment would be an unjust God. And he would not care for his people because he would not want to protect them.

And nor would he care for truth because he'd let it be squashed. Friends, a God of justice must by definition be a God of judgment. And a God without judgment is not a God of justice.

[28 : 44] And a God who is without justice and without judgment is not a God you want to worship. He is not a God worthy of worship. If God is God, then God will be just and God must punish sin.

Friends, those four truths that we've learned are not just truths for the Old Testament. They are truths that are in the very center of biblical revelation. Where does the Bible hang its center of its revelation of God?

Well, it is in the Lord Jesus Christ himself, isn't he? And when God sends his son into the world, what is he doing? He's declaring, I am God and I matter. And when Jesus does battle with the religious authorities of his day, he declares to them, theology matters and truth matters.

And when he speaks his words and when he acts his actions and when he criticizes people, he declares that he considers that there is a right way to conduct yourself before God and a wrong way to do it.

And when he hangs on the cross, he declares that wrong conduct deserves judgment and must be punished. And he takes the punishment. He declares that God must be just.

[29 : 56] That is why I have come. By his death on the cross, he also announces what the Old Testament made constantly clear, that he loves mercy and that mercy in the heart of God will always seek to triumph over judgment.

Friends, in the midst of a world blind and deaf to God, God sends his son into the world with a resounding declaration.

The truths announced in Ezekiel and the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament are clear. God is God. And God does matter.

And there is a right and a wrong way to conduct yourself before him. And there is a right teaching and a wrong teaching. And the neglect of those truths deserves judgment.

However, it also announces that there is one who can turn away that judgment. If he is turned to. There is a Jesus who can take the penalty of sin for us.

[30 : 54] Friends, can you see what I'm saying? I'm saying that the truths of Ezekiel are truths that determine our destiny. They tell us who God is and how he will act toward us.

They give us insight into his character. And they tell us what he expects of us. And they tell us what we can expect of him. So in wrapping up, what I'd like to do is suggest how we might respond to these truths.

They're awesome truths, aren't they? Overwhelming as they must have been overwhelming to the people of Ezekiel's day. I've got a number of suggestions. My first suggestion is for each of us to go home this night and to take a good, hard look at our spiritual eyes and ears.

You see, let us ask ourselves whether the daily grind of life has blinded us to reality and caused our ears to be blocked to our God's word and to his truth.

Friends, the danger with blindness is that it can happen so slowly that you might not notice that it's going on until it's too late. The same thing can happen with hearing.

[32 : 03] So may I urge you tonight to run a quick spiritual check. See how your ears are going. Do a test on your spiritual eyesight.

And make sure you are hearing God's word well. Make sure you're not blind to the truths that we've explored in his word today. So there's the first suggestion.

Check your spiritual eyes and ears. And do it regularly is a good idea. Second, my second suggestion is that you determine that when God confronts you with truth, that you will determine not to evade it.

Friends, has anyone ever told you the truth and it was sore and hard and hurt? Well, when that happens, truth can be extremely painful.

It can often confront us. And what is our reaction when that happens? It is to turn tail and run. Or to push it under. To suppress it.

[33 : 08] Friends, let me urge you to avoid this course of action. For God cannot be run from. If you don't believe it, read Jonah sometime. He tried.

God cannot be run from. And continual suppression of his truth will dull your senses to truth. Now, when God's truth exposes you, take some advice.

Embrace it. Painful though it might be. And in embracing it, you will learn and grow. You see, now I've taught myself that when I'm hurt by God's truth, I'm on the edge of learning something new.

I'm on the edge of growing. It may be painful, but it will result in spiritual growth. My third suggestion is that you do what you can in your part of the world and in your part of the church to stop the corruption of God's truth.

Some attempts at corrupting truth are, as I said earlier, are open and profoundly wrong. Others are very subtle, like the devil himself behind them.

[34 : 19] Some are propagated by evil people with Satan so obviously standing behind them. Others are propagated by people with idols in their hearts, like the leaders of Israel.

And do you know what's worse? Even others are put forward by good people with good intentions. This world's love affair with toleration has blinded us.

It has made us unwilling to name falsehood as such. Pluralism has made us reluctant to speak out and to speak the truth.

And mistaken ideas of love have downplayed truth. Friends, the world and the Christian church are full of falsehoods and replete with false prophets.

In this context, I want to urge us tonight to be like Ezekiel and the prophets of old and to be like the Lord Jesus and his apostles. Let us be champions of the truth.

[35 : 19] Let us guard the truth. Let us speak the truth ourselves. And let's correct and rebuke when we see it or hear it. Friends, we must love even as God has loved us.

However, this does not mean that good theology doesn't matter and can be glazed over. It does not mean that bad theology can be put up with.

Right theology, right thinking about God does matter. To let falsehood thrive is in the end to let go of truth.

To let go of truth is to not love your brothers and sisters in Christ. Our Lord knew this. And that is why he spoke of the punishment of false teachers in his teaching.

And he warned that those who cause his disciples to stumble would suffer the worst sort of punishment. Why would God say this? Because God loves his people.

[36 : 19] God loves truth. And he wants us to be champions of it. Proclaiming it. Living it. Combating it. God loves truth.

Let us love it as much. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the fearlessness of Ezekiel the prophet.

Thank you that he was willing to speak truth into a world that was not willing to hear it. Father, we live in a world that often does not want to hear truth as well.

And even in Christian churches that often don't want to hear truth. Father, help us not to get sucked in by the spirit of our age. And by the devices of the evil one.

Please help us to love truth. Help us to love the Lord Jesus. Help us to speak truth on his behalf.

And Father, please help us not to be blind or deaf ourselves.

[37 : 27] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.