

A Persistent Widow

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[0 : 00] So friends, we're going to read now from the Word of God. We're going to be reading from Luke chapter 17, verse 11 through to chapter 18 and verse 8.

So Luke chapter 17, it'll be on the screens there for you. So Luke 17 from verse 11.

On the way to Jerusalem, he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered the village, he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

And when he saw them, he said to them, Go and show yourselves to the priests. And as they went, they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

And he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. And then Jesus answered, Were not ten cleansed?

[1 : 12] Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? And he said to him, Rise and go your way.

Your faith has made you well. Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, Look, here it is, or there.

For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. And he said to the disciples, The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.

And they will say to you, Look there, or look here. Do not go out or follow them. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation, just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.

[2 : 21] They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot, they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.

But on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all. So will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

On that day let the one who is on the housetop with his goods in the house not come down to take them away. And likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back.

Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed and one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together, one will be taken and the other left. And they said to him, Where, Lord? He said to them, Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

[3 : 35] And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.

And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary. For a while he refused. But afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Amen. And we ask God to bless this reading of his holy inspired word to us here this morning. So friends, before we look together at the parable of the persistent widow, let us once again unite our

hearts in prayer.

[5 : 01] Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for the joy and the privilege we have to worship you here in this place this morning.

We thank you for those that are here. We ask you to bless them and encourage them as they hear your word, as they sing your praises, as they come before you in prayer. We pray for those joining us online.

We ask that you would strengthen them too and encourage them and bless them from the way they participate today. Even if they're not here with us physically, they are here with us in spirit.

We are still united together with them in worship. And we show great joy that they can join us together to worship you.

We pray for those who are not here, those who are unwell. We ask that you would encourage and strengthen them. That if it is your will, you would bring swift healing to them. That they would know your peace during their suffering and their trials.

[6 : 02] Whatever they face, Lord, that you would bless them. That if they are alone, that you would reassure them that they are not alone. That they are part of your family.

They are part of your church, the body of Christ. They are united with your Son through your Holy Spirit. They are never alone. They are always with you.

And they are always with us. We thank you, Lord. For the wonderful weather we've been having these last few days.

For the way we've been able to enjoy your creation as we've been outside. We thank you for Her Majesty the Queen. For the 70 years she has ruled and served you on the throne.

And yet we know even though she is a queen, she sits beneath you. Beneath your Son who is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And yet we thank you for her service. And we pray that her faith, her steadfast faith, would be a great witness to our land.

[7 : 09] Where such a faith is rare. Where many people don't know you. Where there are those who actively work against you. We pray for our governments, for those in Westminster and those in Holyrood.

We pray that you would strengthen them. That you would bless them. That you would lead them to work in a godly way. That as they make laws and as they govern our land, they would do so in a way that brings honour to you and serves the people with the best interest that they can.

Lord, we pray for your church which seems so weak in so many places. And yet we know that around the world it is growing, it is thriving.

It is almost becoming uncountable in some places. The speed at which it's growing. So encourage us, Lord, in our own context as we see things struggling. As we see more and more mainline churches walking away from you.

Walking away from your word and going the way of the world. Lord, we pray that you would strengthen those who are still faithful. You would encourage them to persevere. That you would give them wisdom to know how best to lead your church.

[8 : 22] We pray for this church here in Livingston. We thank you for them, for their witness in the community. And we pray that you would help them in their vacancy to grow and be strong.

And to reach out in their community as they seek to call a minister. We pray that you would call the right man, a godly man, to come and serve you here in this place.

We thank you that we can be here for the next six weeks. We pray that the people will be blessed.

And that we, my family, would be blessed too by our experience here. By worshipping together with the saints in Livingston.

Father, we thank you for all things. For all things come from you. We thank you for your word. Lord, may it be a great blessing to us. We thank you for you.

For all that you've done for us. We can never thank you enough. We can never pay you back. But we don't have to. Because it's a gift.

[9 : 25] Be with us, Lord. Strengthen us. And bless us. And bless all other churches meeting in this area and around our land. Lord, we worship you today. Forgive us.

Encourage us. Strengthen us. And bless us. In Jesus Christ's precious name we ask it. Amen.

Amen. So as I mentioned, I'm going to spend the next few weeks looking over some of the parables of Jesus with you.

Many of you, I'm sure, are very familiar with the parables. Because the parables of Jesus are among some of the most well-known stories that have ever been told in the history of the world. Even many people who have never picked up a Bible before in their lives, who have never crossed the threshold of a church, will be aware, I think, of at least one, if not two, or maybe a couple more, of Jesus' parables.

It's the accessibility of these parables that make them a really good and valuable aid to teaching and telling people about Jesus.

[10 : 45] And when Jesus told them, he did so with great authority and great power. Because I think it's safe to say that Jesus was arguably the most gifted teacher that has ever walked the face of the world.

Think about this. Think about who Jesus is. Jesus is God. He is truth incarnate. So when he's speaking, it is truth that is speaking.

We must believe what he says because he has the authority to say it. And because it's in his nature to tell us the truth.

However, some ways just having truth is not enough. A person can have the truth. They can have the wonderful truth of the gospel.

And yet, they can teach it so poorly that people just don't listen. Or they lose the track of what they're trying to say. Or they don't understand it.

[11 : 49] So not only did Jesus teach the truth perfectly, but he also taught it well. He taught it in a way that people could access.

That they could understand. That they could know. He delivered it in such a way that wasn't dull. That wasn't boring. It wasn't inaccessible. It was so that people could hear it.

One of the main ways he taught was, of course, through the parables. A parable is something that is literally thrown alongside or cast alongside something else.

It's a form of illustration. They're not true stories. But they're stories that could have been true. If that makes sense. We're told often that illustration is a key part of any preacher's sermon.

If you're like John Angus and you've been looking into real estate recently, you'll be told that it's all about location, location, location. Well, with preaching, we're told it's all about illustration, illustration, illustration.

[13 : 00] Because illustrations make, help things clear. They allow difficult concepts to be communicated well and understood by anyone. And Jesus uses parables in this way to kind of illustrate and to illustrate a point.

But of course, he does so differently to how we might do the same today. I want to look briefly at what Jesus says after he is told the parable of the sower in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13.

He says these curious words. He says, he who has ears, let him hear. Again, it's a curious phrase, really, isn't it, to use.

Everyone has ears. True, they may not all work perfectly. There may be some who struggle to hear more than others. There may be some who are deaf. And yet everyone has physical ears, don't they?

And there are ways of communicating to those who even struggle to hear so that into ways they can understand. So what Jesus was talking about was not the ability of people to hear, but rather the ability to understand what is being said and then to embrace it and to take it on board.

[14 : 19] When Jesus says, he who has ears, let him hear, he's understanding that some people may hear what he says, may hear his perfect teaching, may hear his wonderful illustrations, may hear the good news that he's telling them, and yet they will not understand it.

If they do not understand it, they will not embrace it. They will not believe it. And they'll walk away no different than before they heard them.

So Jesus is making a distinction between those who hear and understand and those who hear and do not. Before we begin, it's important to note that parables are not allegories in the same way that the Pilgrim's Progress or the Narnia stories may be seen as an allegory.

They may contain some allegorical elements within them, but they rather consist of one main central point that Jesus is trying to teach.

Some may have a couple of other smaller points built in, but they all revolve around this one central theme. Thankfully, in the parable we've looked at today, Jesus has already told us what this theme is, so we don't have to work very hard to figure it out.

[15 : 47] He told them it's a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart. So let's look at this parable then together.

We're going to look at three headings from the parable of the persistent widow. We're going to look together at persistent seeking, persistent justice, and persistent faith.

So our first heading then is persistent seeking. Let's read verses 1 through 5 of chapter 18 together again.

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said in a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.

And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, give me justice against my adversary. For a while he refused, but afterwards he said to himself, though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

[17 : 00] So I'm going to hazard a guess here and say that all of you have heard of the Walt Disney Company. It's currently one of the largest and most profitable corporations in the world.

Well, it wasn't always that way. If you go back to its very beginning, go back to its founder, Walt Disney. Walt Disney was fired from a local newspaper where he worked because his boss told him he lacked creativity.

He then tried to start up a failed animation company. When that failed, he was struggling to pay his bills. He even resorted to eating dog food to survive at a time.

With what little money he had left, he made his decision to move to Hollywood to try and make it big one last time. Unfortunately, his early time in Hollywood was just as bad.

He was turned down again and again by studios. He was told that Mickey Mouse would fail. He faced constant rejection, and he seemed destined to never succeed.

[18 : 12] Of course, we know how the story ends. We know that Walt persisted and went on to grow the company, which will then later have amusement parks, multiple films, and then go on and acquire other things over the years.

Today is one of our cultural icons. It has a great influence on our culture here in the West. Ironically, a few years later, Walt Disney bought the Kansas City Star newspaper, the very paper he was fired from.

Persistence is an admirable trait. We like to encourage it, don't we? We like to nurture it in our children. We like to teach them to be persistent in how they achieve their goals.

But the reason behind this persistence should really be more important than simply being persistent itself. This parable tells us the story of one who showed real persistence, real tenacity.

Sometimes it's called the parable of the persistent widow. Other times the parable of the unjust judge. It depends on your translation and the headings that you have in your Bibles. But in this story, Jesus is telling his followers not to falter when faced with difficulties, but always to pray.

[19 : 44] He was telling his people never to surrender, never to despair, but always to pray. One recalls that famous speech by Winston Churchill at the beginning of the war, another speech that focuses heavily on persistence.

I'm sure you know the words, you know, we shall fight them on the beaches, on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields, and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.

Perseverance is a battle. It's a war that we fight. And if you do not give it your all, then you will lose. But Jesus is calling his people to a different kind of battle.

He's calling them to the battle for prayer. We've just heard how Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. We heard some of the things he'd been up to on his way, how he'd been healing people, how he was teaching people. Immediately prior to this parable, he's been teaching about his return, the judgment that will face the world when he comes back.

[20 : 53] He's been talking about the fulfillment, the full coming of the kingdom of God. So when we read this parable about prayer, it's important to note, I think, that it's not just talking about prayer in general, although that's a good thing.

I think it's best specifically here, it's talking about prayer, about the kingdom of God.

We're not to pester God continually until he gives us what he wants. Rather, we're to pray for justice. We're to pray for justice in an unjust world, where we await the return of Jesus.

Here we have the story of a widow who's in need of justice. Something has happened to her. We don't know what that is.

We're not told what that thing is. But whatever it is demands justice. She's been wronged. She demands justice against the one who has wronged her.

[21 : 55] She isn't seeking revenge. She simply wants justice. She is vulnerable as a widow. She would have nobody else that could speak up for her on her behalf.

She's all on her own. So she takes the initiative, and she goes to the one who should be able to bring her justice, the one whose job it was to bring the justice.

She needed it. She goes to see the judge. And yet, what are we told about this judge? We're told firstly that he neither feared God nor cared about men.

He was a judge with no justice. He was a man, it seems, of the world. Somebody who looked out for his own interests only. A man who likely prouided himself and his position and his shrewdness.

And his legal capabilities. But he did not care for others. Nor did he fear God. Only his own needs, his own desires, his own cares.

[23 : 06] Those are the only things he cared about. It also seems he doesn't seem to care who the person is. I wonder if it were a rich person who came to see him instead of a widow, if his response would have been much different.

Because we're simply told that he refused her petition. The widow goes to him and she says, grant me justice, please, just do your job against the one who has wronged me.

And yet this judge refuses. Now I'm sure most of us, if we refuse to do our jobs, wouldn't be in them for very much longer. And yet this man is so assured of himself, he is so assured of his position, that he refuses to perform his duty to this widow, one of the most vulnerable members of his society, and yet here, ashamedly, neglected.

But she knows she's in the right. She knows she has a case. And remember, all she has is herself. She has nobody else to come and speak on her behalf. So, again and again, she goes to the unjust judge to plead her case.

[24 : 24] It would seem the judge persisted for a while, but eventually relents. But it's the reason he relents that we're meant to pay attention to. He doesn't relent for the woman's sake.

Again, he still doesn't care about her, still doesn't care about what she needs. But rather he relents for his own sake. He thinks to himself, she's just going to keep pestering me until I do this for her, so I may as well do it before she totally wears me down.

So, we have in the ESV, it translated, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

Other translations sometimes use wear me down or things to that effect.

And it's quite a difficult one to translate by all accounts. It literally means, in the Greek, to strike under the eye. So, basically, to be punched in the face or to be given a black eye.

Now, I doubt the judge was fearing being beaten up by this widowed woman, although the modern NIV does translate it this way, interestingly. But I think it's more of a metaphor to give one intolerable annoyance as one lexicon had it.

[25 : 45] Intolerable annoyance. I really like that phrase. It's like my son in the morning at five o'clock when he wants to get up. It's that intolerable annoyance. One other possibility is that it was to denote shame.

The idea of having one's face blackened and bruised in many contexts is a marker of shame. It kind of shows weakness that you've not been able to put up a fight, that you've been defeated.

We have a similar phrase in our own context, don't we? If you say you've given someone a black eye, it's almost like you've wounded their pride, that they're feeling kind of flat and defeated.

But I think that that's really not what this means. I think because of this man's great indifference, he doesn't seem to care about his own reputation. He doesn't seem to care about however they think about him.

He's more concerned, I think, with his own comfort and peace rather than his own reputation. So I think the translators are right when they say they kind of beat me down or wear me down.

[26 : 55] That sense of he's just had enough rather than being ashamed. So to make his life easier, he just gives in. And so the widow got her justice.

For her own sheer grit and determination, her persistence won the day. But again, that is not what we're to take away from this.

There may be times when we're dealing with earthly authorities that that same persistence may be required. I don't know if any of you had to deal with the planning department, for example. You really need to be persistent with the planning department.

They really don't like talking to people very much. But this shouldn't be our primary means of accomplishing anything. thinking of evangelism, of going out and sharing the good news.

We want to be persistent, but we don't want to pester. You know, we don't want to annoy people into coming to church because that's not really going to get off to a good start, is it? There's a famous story from the life of Moody, the famous American preacher, evangelist, and publisher who lived around 100 years ago.

[28 : 04] So the year is 1893, and the World's Columbian Exposition was being held in Chicago. And during this great festival, this great exposition that was held in that city, it's estimated about 23 million people came in and out of Chicago during that time.

Part of this event was something called the World Parliament of Religions where all religious leaders, well not all of them, but many religious leaders from all the different world faiths gathered together to discuss what it meant to have faith.

There was talk about them maybe combining all the best elements of their faith to come up with one new universal world religion. It didn't work, obviously. And D.L. Moody was in Chicago at that time and his friends told him, you really need to go and preach against this event.

You need to condemn them and say how wrong they are for trying to mix all these religions together. But that's not what Moody did. Instead, he saw this whole event with all these millions of people as a great opportunity for evangelism.

He gathered as many evangelists and preachers as he could find and assigned them preaching posts all throughout the city just preaching the good news to all the people who went by them.

[29 : 23] And he had one goal in mind. Moody said, I want to make Jesus Christ so attractive that men will turn to him. And supposedly many thousands of people did respond to this preaching, this evangelism in the city of Chicago during that time.

This is what we want to do, isn't it? We want to make Jesus attractive. We want to not pester people. We want to attract them to church.

We want to attract them to the gospel. We want them to see their need for Jesus and how much he loves them. We want to attract people to Christ.

We certainly do not want to pester God in order to get what we want. We do not want to keep coming to God again and again and again saying, please give me this, especially if it's something that maybe isn't what we need or isn't something that's good.

But Jesus isn't comparing God to the judge here. Rather, he's showing the contrast that exists between them. So we have persistent seeking.

[30 : 37] Secondly, then, we have persistent justice. The judge did not know this widow. He didn't care about her. He wasn't concerned about her well-being.

She's just an unknown, troublesome person in whom he takes no interest in, about whose fate he does not care about save to serve his own needs. But that is not how it is between God and his children.

God knows his people. He loves them. He's concerned for them. He knows their needs. God pays attention to you.

He knows what you're facing in life. So if this awful judge would eventually give in and give the widow justice to save himself, the bother of her pestering, then how much are we told?

How much more will a loving heavenly father grant his people justice? If even an unrighteous and reluctant judge will eventually do the right thing, how much more will God, who is good, who is holy, who is just, who is eager to vindicate those whom he has chosen in his love, how much more will he work for us?

[32 : 00] Muchly and greatly, more than we could ever really expect or imagine, he will give justice to them speedily. I said this isn't in comparison and largely it isn't, but there are some comparative elements.

Both God and the man are judges. They will declare people innocent and set them free, or they will declare people guilty and condemn them. The judge has no care for his reputation, but God does. God will guard his reputation. He will vindicate himself. We've got one man who is unjust and then one God who is the very purest justice.

Doesn't take much, does it really, to see injustice in our world today? And often it upsets us. It fills us with compassion for those to whom justice is denied.

When we see terrible things happening to the church in various parts of the world, it hurts us even more because it's a part of our own body that's being attacked, that's being damaged, that's being hurt.

[33 : 11] And if even an unrighteous judge will eventually give in and hear the needs of a persistent widow, how much more should we seek our Father God to come to our aid when we are struggling.

And he won't brush us off. He won't refuse us an audience. He won't slam the door in our faces. Instead, he welcomes us as his children.

He embraces us in his love. He listens to our cry lovingly and he will not delay to bring justice to his own elect people. people. This is something I think we really need to hear today.

Friends, we need to know that justice will come and it will come quickly. We need to know because we are frail, because we're prone to lose heart, because we are broken, because we're so quick to fall into unbelief when hard times come.

We need to hear this because otherwise the huge injustices that fill our world will simply drive us to despair. Think, why is Russia doing what they're doing?

[34 : 23] How are they allowed to continue in this great injustice? Why are so many Christians dying or being imprisoned or being put into work camps for their faith? Why are so many Western governments so determined to destroy biblical ethics?

Why is all this happening? Why is all this injustice? Remember, our vision is clouded. We can only see things from our limited perspectives.

We can only see a limited amount of what's going on in the world around us, even through the news and the media today. But remember, God sees all and God is for his people.

We need to be constantly reminded of this. We need to be constantly reminded of God's kind heart, of his great power toward us as we fight against this inherent unbelief that's in us.

We now belong to him. We are his children. He is our advocate. He delights to care for us and to defend us. Will not God give justice to his chosen ones, to his children, to the ones for whom Jesus died?

[35 : 37] Those sins whom he bore on the cross, will he not give justice to them. Sometimes we feel that there is no justice in the world, but with God there is persistent justice.

He will avenge his people. The wronged will be righted. Those who do evil will be punished and his children he will save.

God will deliver his people. Those from whom he finds persistent faith when the time comes. So we have persistent seeking, we have persistent justice, and finally then we have persistent faith.

If you have an accident, God forbid it. If you fall and break your leg and you or somebody else calls for an ambulance to take you to hospital for treatment, you know that once that phone call has been made, the help is on the way.

You know the ambulance is coming, the help and relief from your suffering are coming, but while you're waiting for it to arrive, it can seem like forever. It can seem like an eternity as you're sitting there in pain with your broken leg, just waiting for help to come.

[37 : 00] Even though you know it's coming, minutes can seem like hours. Help from God is coming. It may seem like it's taking forever out of our perspective, but I think it will be shorter really than we realize.

When Jesus says, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? He's not saying that there'll be no church. Rather, he is exhorting his church to keep strong, to not let their faith waver, to be persistent in prayer.

The closing words of Jesus in his parable are a kind of call to arms, similar to the one we heard from Winston Churchill earlier, that call never to surrender.

As much as we might want God to come and free his people now, to bring justice to his saints now, God, I think, wants it even more.

And he will do it when the right time comes. His justice will come swiftly and surely and the long suffering that his people have been enduring will come to an end.

[38 : 17] And it will also seem like just the blink of an eye compared to the everlasting glory that awaits the followers of Christ. But will that delay cause some to falter and some to fall away?

That question is left unanswered. We're not told in this parable. But this is a call to arms. It's a call to prayer.

When he returns, Jesus will be looking for those who are praying and who are watching for him to come. Prayer will give us the strength we need to persevere. Prayer will keep us from losing heart. Faith is like a crop in a farmer's field. If you plant it and leave it alone, it might grow a little bit, but it'll be attacked by bugs and disease and weeds and hungry wildlife and it'll soon be gone.

But if it's carefully cultivated and encouraged, it will grow into a great harvest. So we are to cultivate our own faith through prayer. We're to talk to your God, talk to your Father in heaven, make your petitions to him, give him thanksgiving for all his love and care.

[39 : 29] Jesus, we're told in Philippians 4, will guard your faith. He'll guard your hearts and your minds.

He'll help it to grow. He'll strengthen it as we await his return. So friends, today do not lose heart. Do not be discouraged.

Instead, seek the perfect judge and be assured that you will be vindicated by him. R.C.

Sproul said that Jesus knows that when he returns, he will find faith on the earth, not because we are so faithful, but because he is faithful to keep those whom the Father has given him.

Therefore, we should pray without ceasing, not only for the vindication of the people of God, but that when our Lord appears, he will find faith in us.

[40 : 32] So let that be our prayer this morning as we finish today. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this parable that tells us to always pray, to be persistent in prayer, not because we'll eventually weigh you down and you'll give us what we ask for, but because you are our Father who loves us.

You will do what is right. You will bring perfect justice. You will vindicate your people and your name. You will bring salvation to those who are struggling. You will uplift the weak.

You will save the dying. You will do so many wonderful things when the time is right. So help us not to lose heart. Help us not to be focused on our own small perspective, but to remember you are our holy, our loving, our just God who sees all things, who knows all of us deeply and intimately, who knows the path, the present and the future.

You know how these things will unfold all according to your plan to help us to pray each and every day, multiple times a day, to not lose heart, for your people to be freed, for the saints to be vindicated, for the persecution of the church, to end, for justice to come, and that our faith would be persistent too through it all, that you would strengthen it, that you would cultivate it within us, that you will grow our faith that you've given us, that you will encourage us when we're weak.

Help us to pray, even when we don't know the words to say, even when we do not have a heart to pray, when we do not want it, when we do not desire it, when we feel we cannot do it, help us to pray, help us, Lord, to be persistent in prayer, and strengthen us when we're weak.

[42 : 31] Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief, be with us, Lord, and strengthen us, for the trials are to come.

In Jesus' holy, great, and precious name, we pray.