

"Good for the Wicked" Ecclesiastes 7:15–29

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[0:00] As we open God's word together, let us ask for his blessing. Heavenly Father, would you be so kind and gracious to us this morning to give us the supernatural ability to hear and understand your word.

! Amen.

If you do not have a Bible, we have a stack of them at the back welcome table. You can grab one. It would help me out a ton if you followed along. If you have a scripture journal, you can turn to page 28.

28. I'll open with a story. There was an archbishop in Uganda in the 70s named Janani Luwam. And he was the archbishop of Uganda, but also Rwanda in some of the neighboring countries and regions during the time of Idiomin. Idiomin, if you know some history, was called the Hitler of Africa.

[1:19] He was a horrendous, horrendous tyrant who took over Uganda in a coup and began a systematic campaign of murder.

It was a horrendous time in Uganda. And the archbishop spoke early against Idiomin. Idiomin, he eventually was faced with a moment where either he shrunk back from speaking against Idiomin, or in speaking against him would surely die.

It kind of reached a level where one more word from this really difficult archbishop, and that would be the end of him. So what did he do?

He spoke against Idiomin. He spoke against the murders and the whole regime of disappearing people. And he was arrested along with two legislators, and then he died.

The story was that he died in the transport to his trial. It was a car accident. And when the family received his body, it was riddled with bullets.

[2:33] Riddled with bullets. He was 55 years old. Idiomin, if you know your history, was able to flee. And he lived out his days in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, and died in 2003 in a plush hospital in his mid-70s.

opened up with a question based on the story that's going to really help drive the rest of our time in Ecclesiastes chapter 7.

Why do kind and good people suffer and even die, while wicked and evil people live long and prosper? Why? Why? Do you know the answer to this question?

It's a confusing and disorienting and deeply unjust reality that we see all the time. We feel the injustice of it. But we can even extend it to smaller scales, where it's not a tyrant versus an archbishop.

But we could even ask the question, why is it that a good, promising, young woman in her 20s can get cancer? Terminal cancer.

[3:41] And yet, a greedy, money-hungry man who is on his maybe fifth or sixth marriage, who has been a terrible father, a terrible co-worker, can live into his 80s.

Why? You feel the injustice in this? The struggle in this? Are you frustrated with it?

This would have been a very confusing reality, not just for us, but for the Israelites as well, that the sage was talking to. Early in their history, God promised the Israelites that if they would keep his commandments, they would live long and prosper.

Yet, time and again, the history of Israel is that the, not every situation, but oftentimes the wicked would live long, and the innocent, or the righteous, or the upright, those that kept God's commandments, they would die young.

So it's a bit of a conundrum, because, number one, we don't have the answer to that, and number two, because if God promised that righteousness would result in long life, is God a liar?

[4:59] Is he unjust? Is God a part of the problem? Is he making promises that he just can't keep? And then if that's the case, what's the point of acting righteous or wise at all?

Especially if the rewards aren't just meager, but they're actually detrimental to our lives, to our health, to our being. See, the sage will try to make sense of this reality, and he's going to do it grappling with human nature, motivations for behavior, and the pursuit of knowledge.

And he's going to try to come to the, hopefully, the answer to this conundrum. Why do the good die young?

Why do the wicked die old? And he's going to really lean into a bit of an investigation on wisdom and righteousness. But he will say, and we will find out that there is certainly a place for wise living and right living, but with a caution.

The sage will teach us that righteousness and wisdom are worthy of embrace. And these will be our three points that will guide us through our time in Ecclesiastes 7. The sage will teach us that righteousness and wisdom are worthy of our embrace, but not a guarantee for our success.

[6:19] That righteousness and wisdom are a source of strength, but not the means of salvation. And then finally, righteousness and wisdom can make one wise, but not upright.

So as we consider this section, we will hopefully seek to answer the conundrum of verse 15. I'm going to be returning to verse 15 often in our time together this morning.

But first, just a bit of a, I don't know, an editorial note, so to speak. The sage and much of wisdom literature in the Bible see righteousness and wisdom as two sides of the same coin.

Those who are wise will act and think and speak rightly. And those who are righteous will live wise lives. So you cannot have one without the other.

So I bring that up just to say I will almost certainly use righteousness and wisdom somewhat interchangeably. Although they are different, but they have a ton of overlap.

[7:24] But for our time this morning, we're going to be looking at righteousness and wisdom as kind of like a package deal. Okay, first point. Righteousness and wisdom are worthy of our embrace, but not a guarantee for our success.

Let's open to verse 15. I'll read it together. We'll read it together. Verse 15. In my vain life, I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing.

The disturbing reality is presented here as a fact. And I think it's easy to say that it's a fact. That we know what is happening. We feel this in a very acute way.

The sage has investigated the matter thoroughly and has reached the troubling conclusion that life simply isn't just. Those who should be declared innocent are jailed.

Okay, those who should be brought to justice have the legal clout, the money to get off scot-free. Young teenagers, like I mentioned already, are diagnosed with cancer.

[8:27] While men like Idi Amin enjoy wealth well into their senior years. I feel very deeply that this is a very uncomfortable reality.

However, I want us to consider that such a statement starts with the assumption that many, perhaps all of us here, hold. And here's the assumption. That good things should happen to good people.

And again, more often than not, we see ourselves as part of the good people category. And therefore, we are deserving of good things.

Seldom do we believe our faults and sins are so severe as to warrant divine justice against us.

Okay? We want divine justice against other people.

Ultimate justice. But when we slip up and when we aren't so good, we want to be treated with a bit more understanding, a bit more nuance.

[9:33] Why do we presume this should be the case? I think it's an important question to ponder. The sage will continue on. Verse 16. Be not overly righteous and do not make yourself too wise.

Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? Verse 18. It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand.

For the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. The sage here is not approving of lax morals or implying that wisdom is pointless.

Instead, he warns against acting and thinking as if we can influence God to grant us long life. This form of righteousness is motivated not by the fear of the Lord about doing right for his sake, but rather it's a self-justifying righteousness, which really isn't a righteousness at all.

This is a heart that believes that we deserve all goodness and no consequence. One that believes that we deserve a long life and goodness.

[10:49] And friends, this type of self-righteousness, it blinds us to our own sinfulness. Conversely, the sage tells us not to intentionally engage in wickedness.

To not say, well there's no point in being good or exercising wisdom, so I'm just going to live the way I want to live. And if it's wicked, so be it. He is saying if someone knows something is wrong, they should not do it.

Willful sinning is completely not okay. The idea that we can let our desires control us because there will be no punishment for our actions as if the wicked can escape the wrongdoings.

It's flawed thinking. We'll get to why it's flawed a bit later on, but it is flawed thinking. So we see neither our self-righteousness on one hand nor our self-gratifying indulgence will guarantee us even one more hour or ensure that our days are both comfortable and bountiful.

The sage is saying, listen, both ends here, both extremes, self-righteousness, self-indulgence, they are not the way to go.

[12:05] Instead, what does he say? Verse 18, It is good that you should not take hold of this, that is self-righteousness, and from that, which is self-gratification, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who, and here it is, fears God shall come out from both of them.

Instead, he says this, entrust yourself to the Lord and obey him. Don't engage in evil. Try your best to be a wise, righteous person for God's glory.

And that's great. It's a really important bit, but see, what it does is it doesn't answer the conundrum of verse 15. Why do the good die young?

Why do the evil have prolonged life? So although the conundrum persists, we begin to see that the answer lies somewhere with the Lord and entrusting ourselves to him.

So, earthly wisdom has a place and a prominent one at that. And we'll see this especially in our second point. But again, we will see that righteousness and wisdom cannot be seen as a way to answer or transcend this conundrum of verse 15.

[13:21] So, the second point, that righteousness and wisdom are a source of strength, but not a means of salvation. Look with me at verses 19 and following. We'll just read verse 19 for now. Wisdom gives strength.

So it has great benefit. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man. More than ten rulers who are in a city. Whether or not wise living leads to a long life, it does not diminish the effectiveness of wisdom. Wisdom still has a purpose. It is still good. It provides great benefits. In fact, it gives significant strength to the righteous. Wise living has the power to prevent calamity.

You're going to have ten strong rulers. Fantastic. But the wise person knows when to sheath the sword. Okay? The wise person also knows when to take the sword out and engage in battle.

The wise person knows when to win an argument and when to hold one's tongue. Ultimately, the wise person is far more valuable than ten mighty rulers. Why?

[14:28] Because the wise person has in mind the flourishing of society. That people ought to not be subject under tyranny.

That life is better than death. And yet, wisdom in this context isn't this absolute savior. Look with me at verse 20. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

No one is perfectly wise. So wisdom has a place, but the wise man isn't ultimately wise. There's no perfectly wise person always making the right decisions, saying the right things, thinking the right thoughts.

There has never been anyone like that. It's not just that there isn't a perfectly wise person, but every person is unrighteous to some degree.

No one who has ever, no one who has never told a lie. There's never been somebody who has not cheated on a test or fudged the charitable givings line on TurboTax.

[15:36] You know, we chuckle, I chuckle at that a little bit, but these are things that that are easily done, but just prove our unrighteousness, our lack of wisdom.

There has never not been somebody who gossiped behind their brother's back or lusted after an image or a video or fantasized about a co-worker or obsessed over money or performed charity with a self-serving motive.

There is not one who is perfectly wise or perfectly righteous. The list could go on. But it is not that one is perfect, but that such imperfection is problematic on a cosmic scale.

It's not just that we make mistakes like everybody else, but that our mistakes, our sin, our unrighteousness, our lack of wisdom is a problem cosmically.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 3, verse 23, he says, all have sinned, okay, we've established that, and connected to it, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

[16:45] Our unrighteous acts, our sin, it says in Scripture that they are an offense to God for they contravene his good and beautiful design for us and the rest of creation. So you see that our problem is never just limited to us.

It has ripple effects all the way to a cosmic scale whereby we are sinning against the glory of God. And this takes us back to the assumption of verse 15, the assumption that says that good people deserve good things.

It seems that the question should not be why do bad things happen to good people or why do not, why is it that good people don't receive good things? Rather, the better question to ask is why do good things happen to anyone at all considering there is no one who is truly good?

If we are sinning that affects kind of ripple, it has this ripple effect all the way up to God, why are we deserving of anything?

We might be tempted to solve this apparent problem through our own ingenuity and attempts at behavior modification.

[18:07] We're going to try harder. Let's just avoid mistakes. All good things, by the way. Or maybe we take measures to lessen the impact of our imperfection.

One of the things that we like to do in the West is legislate our problems away. And there is a fantastic, important place for good legislation.

But the best we can do as a society is create legislation that prohibits something but can't compel goodness. So an example, you can't make a law that forces people to pick up every piece of trash they see and put it in the waste bin.

But you can make a law and it could be kept reasonably that you shouldn't litter. Whether or not people listen to it is besides the point. But we can't force people to be better.

We can't. The best we can do is mitigate problems. And why is that? Because the core of the issue is not primarily with our actions but with our hearts.

[19:20] They are inclined towards evil. They are inclined towards sin. And the sage he captures this perfectly in the next two verses. Look with me at verses 21 and 22. Do not take to heart all the things that people say lest you hear your servant cursing you.

Verse 22. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. Again, we are deeply convinced that the true wrongs are out there and done against us.

But we deceive ourselves into believing we are immune to sin. However, we know on a very fundamental level that we have wronged just as we have wronged others. So, the sage, now we're halfway through this section, the sage is beginning to help us see a more full-orbed understanding of human nature.

And it's not a great outlook. And hopefully, we start developing this answer to the conundrum of verse 15. And we start to see a bit of the answer here.

No one is truly righteous. So to say, again, in verse 15, there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, we've actually come to find out that nobody's truly righteous.

[20:40] Nobody can claim absolute righteousness. Everyone harbors some kind of wickedness. And as a result, no one can genuinely claim God's blessing as an expectation or a right.

Very, very important. However, we still lack a clear answer to the second puzzling question in verse 15. Why do wicked, why do the wicked often prosper while the good endure suffering?

So why do the wicked prosper? Again, it's very perplexing to us. And it's helpful, at least for me, to know that the sage, who is this incredibly wise, divinely inspired writer, it is perplexing to him as well.

Look with me at verses 23 and 24. All this, and all this, by the way, is this kind of grammatical, biblical phrase that points backwards and forwards.

So everything that I just said, everything that I'm going to say, all this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which has been is far off and deep, very deep.

[21:56] Who can find it out? He dug deep, deep. His investigation was thorough, only to realize that he couldn't reach the bottom of the matter.

And we are beginning to see that this might be divinely classified information. We get what appears to be a snippet of an answer, but never a complete one.

And this is the difficulty with seeking wisdom. And here's the difficulty with it. As you get more wise, you realize that you can understand deep things in a very shallow way. And this can be a frustrating thing because you understand it in part, but there's so much more that you realize that you don't know.

A 4th century bishop, Gregory of Nazianzus, he was the bishop of Constantinople, he said this of this section here, and this pursuit of wisdom.

Quote, For the joy of what we have discovered is no greater than the pain of what escapes us. A pain I imagine like that felt by those who are dragged while yet thirsty from the water, or are unable to retain what they think they hold, and I like this one, or are suddenly left in the dark by a flash of lightning.

[23:17] Therefore, there is a significant irony in using earthly wisdom. Again, if you've been tracking with us with Ecclesiastes, earthly wisdom, you could say wisdom under the sun, this idea that this earthly life is finite and it's under the sun, there is a significant irony in using earthly wisdom under the sun to understand the divine and transcending God who is above it.

What results is the realization of just how much you and I don't know. And still, funny enough, this is a form of wisdom because true wisdom will ultimately help us to be humble people and help us to recognize how finite we are.

True wisdom understands limits and helps us to look upward, not inward. It helps us to understand the truth of Isaiah 55 verse 9.

Isaiah says this, speaking, actually the Lord says this through Isaiah. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

And what a fantastic revelation for the sage and for us this morning. He is coming to understand, we are coming to understand that God is worthy of fear and praise because he is entirely infinite and we cannot hope to comprehend him fully.

[24:44] But what about the question of evil people prospering? Okay? So there's certain things we can't understand and we have kind of answered one part of the conundrum of verse 15 but if we haven't answered both parts then we haven't answered it at all.

So what is the sage to do? He doesn't give up his search, he continues on and this leads us to our third point where righteousness and wisdom it can make one wise but not upright.

Look with me at verse 25. I turn my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom in the scheme of things and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

The sage dedicates himself fully to understanding and these are key words here that help us to tie in this last section and also the section above it. He gives himself to understanding exploring and seeking wisdom and the reasons behind why life is the way it is.

He has examined wisdom, he has sought it out in some great detail but not fully. Now he turns his attention to the wickedness and foolish. Maybe there's some answers there.

[26:03] And now we turn to verse 26 to the end of this section. And I find something more bitter than death. The woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters.

He who pleases God escapes her but the sinner is taken by her. Behold this is what I found says the preacher while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things which my soul has sought repeatedly but I have not found.

One man among a thousand I found but a woman among all these I have not found. See this alone I found that God made man upright but they have sought out many schemes.

I've throughout this time in Ecclesiastes I mean I use commentaries to help me because there's like way smarter people that I need help from and I've used three commentaries some weeks I've used four.

This week I looked at I think five. And in every commentary there's almost unanimity in saying that this section verses 15 to 29 and especially this section we're in now 26 to 29 is quite possibly the hardest section to understand in Ecclesiastes.

[27:22] therefore there's a great temptation for Bible commentators and preachers to skip this or allegorize it excessively or even defend God from accusations of being a misogynist by condemning the sage.

But let's take a few minutes to walk towards this uncomfortable passage. Throughout this section we have seen the destructive effects of self-righteousness and self-indulgence or wickedness on relationships.

The super-righteous the self-righteous person ostracizes others. Again if you go to verse 16 and 17 especially verse 16 be not overly righteous and do not make yourself too wise.

Why should you destroy yourself? Again in the context of Ecclesiastes and in here how does one destroy themselves? Well I think a big part of it of course is to be separated from the Lord but it's to see these wonderful God-given blessings of relationships start to break down.

And it doesn't take a Bible scholar to understand that a self-righteous friend quickly becomes not a great friend. A self-righteous brother or sister is not really the greatest brother or sister.

[28:48] brother. Likewise we see that slander and cursing are common among both the poor and the rich and the heart is very hypocritical condemning others but giving ourself the get-out-of-jail free card.

All of this is relational breakdown and this section is in that vein. There is no greater relational breakdown caused by sin than between a man and a woman in relationship.

When marriages break apart. When couples grow distant. The woman described here is one who has no regard for the consequences of her actions.

She might be a wife. She might be somebody else. But her actions they are self-seeking. She desires only one thing and has no respect for the fear of the Lord.

Who cares if it destroys a family? She lacks integrity and honor. The relationship with her is so damaging that the sage suggests death may be a less bitter fate.

[30:00] And we do ourselves no favors by glossing over a text like this. There are women that exist like this. However, there is also a man who does not fear God, who engages in wickedness and pursues this kind of woman.

He is just as responsible for going to places he should not go as she is. He is neither wise nor is he loyal. He does not want the burdens of manhood, the responsibilities of being a man.

He's still a boy. He is neither hard-working nor self-controlled. His aim is not to heal or to protect or to bless, but to exploit a woman to satisfy his desire, his lust.

He lacks integrity and honor. Such an attitude is more bitter than death. It takes two to tango, okay? It really does. The sage's commentary does not come across, therefore, more as a woman hater.

Instead, it reflects that of a man who has probably learned the hard way if he has learned at all.

[31:15] I'll just take a pause here. I have resisted and I've fielded some questions from people as to why I have not referred to the preacher or the sage as Solomon throughout our time in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes. And I think one of the reasons I've chosen to do this is because there's a bit of a temptation, at least for myself, to interpret too much of Solomon's biography throughout the text rather than letting the text speak the way it is.

Fantastic, brilliant scholars have chosen to just assume that Solomon had written every word of it and that's totally fine. I bring this up not to debate the authorship of Ecclesiastes. I will just say I want to concede that if Solomon did in fact author Ecclesiastes or part of Ecclesiastes then I think

we have his words here.

You see Solomon, the wisest man on earth who enjoyed all that life had to offer, turned out to be quite wicked in the end. He exploited hundreds, hundreds, he exploited hundreds of women to satisfy his lust and to be a show of his power, neglecting his own kingdom and becoming a polytheist.

He was a wicked man who thrived and lived a relatively long life. Perhaps there is something in thinking about Solomon that helps us to understand the second part of the conundrum in verse 15. [32:45] The wicked man who lives long is not necessarily the one who is the fortunate one. For long life is only a blessing if it is a righteous life, not a wicked one.

You know, Idiomin dies pancreatic cancer. Uganda refused, the government at the time refused to repatriate him and kind of wipe his slate clean.

They said, if you're going to come back, we're going to try you and hang you. and he died, not exactly in the best spot. I think the sage is saying that Idiomin, he might have lived long as a wicked man, but he didn't live a fortunate life.

A long wicked life is still a wicked one. Returning to verse 26, while we shouldn't immediately seek to allegorize the challenging passage, which we didn't just now, we should remember that we can allegorize it.

And that would be an important thing for us to do. And the reason is common in wisdom literature is this depiction of wickedness as an evil and deceitful woman.

[34:05] By the way, it also allegorizes wisdom as a woman as well. So, going back to Proverbs, we see, especially in chapter 7 of Proverbs, lady folly or dame folly, as the one who resembles this woman in Ecclesiastes.

Therefore, it's fitting to say that the sage, or in this case, if it is Solomon, is also describing wickedness in a general sense. Flee from wickedness.

The wise person would flee from her. The one that seeks to serve the Lord would flee from her, would flee from wickedness.

In fact, this kind of wickedness is so widespread that he finds that no one, again, remember, verse 20, no one is righteous and concludes the most definitive answer to the conundrum of verse 15.

We see it in verse 29. If you turn with me to verse 29. See, this alone I found, that God made upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

[35:14] in the end, God's not responsible for the injustice of the world. We are. He made everything wonderful and beautiful and good. The first word that came out of his mouth in creation after he made everything in Genesis 1 and 2 was good, was good, was good, was good, was good.

He gets to mankind. What does he say? It was very good. That was the first words he spoke over us. It was very good. And yet, the sage helps us to see that that's not the case anymore.

God made man upright, but we schemed against him. It turns out the fall in Genesis chapter 3 was in fact quite real, and its effects are incredibly widespread, and it touches every man, woman, and child.

The fall is indeed our fault, but friends, it is not our fate. I'll wrap it up with this. verse 20 is completely spot on.

So too is verse 29. There is no one righteous, no one can save themselves, no one is upright, not even one in a thousand, which is to say that nobody is upright.

[36:28] But there was one who was completely upright. There was one who was fully wise. There was one who was perfect in his devotion and love to the Lord, and yet even he died young.

Whether Jesus died at 30 or 33, the fact is he did not die at 60 or 70 or 80. He died a young man. And although his death was completely unjust, it was not without purpose.

The Lord gave his only begotten son to take upon himself human flesh in the person of Jesus, to live under the sun, to die under the sun, so that we could be freed from the cycle of injustice and unrighteousness forever.

That our fate is not to live this vain life under the sun and then cease to exist, to die, whether young or old, but then be nothing, to fade into obscurity.

Instead, the promise is that he will one day make all upright. He will make us righteous by clothing us in his righteousness.

[37:45] So the good news is, we need to be righteous, we need to be wise, we need to be perfect in order to somehow transcend this life under the sun.

Jesus comes, not just to show us some, to give us some tips and tricks on how to make that happen, but to live and to die and to rise again and then if we put our faith in him, clothe us in his righteousness so that we would have a fighting chance, and not just a fighting chance, but a guarantee that we can transcend this vain life under the sun.

I'll read a few dynamite passages from the Bible that speak to this. Isaiah 61, verse 10, Galatians 3, verse 27, for as many as you were baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.

And then finally, Romans chapter 13, verse 14, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

Really, the biggest revelation from all this, hopefully we've come to a decent, solid handle on the conundrum of verse 15, but really the biggest revelation that the sage reveals in this passage is that an all powerful, perfectly good, and all knowing God would give a gift to unworthy people.

[39:26] And not just a gift, but his own son. He doesn't just give us a few extra years, a few extra decades, a few nicer things, you know, excellent relationships.

Whether those things happen or not, they're gifts from God. It's his prerogative to give or to not give. But the real gift he gives is his son. And because we are clothed with Christ's righteousness through faith, and because he rose from the dead, we can be confident that this vain life will not be vain for much longer.

And in fact, the beauty and the goodness of the life to come begins in this life. So although we experience the difficulty of this life, we start to live out this heavenly reality now.

It's also a promise that ultimately, wickedness will not prosper, even if it does here on earth. Idiomin will answer for his evils.

And praise God that he will. And Bishop Luom, because of Christ, did not die in vain. Praise God for that. Therefore, righteousness and wisdom in the fear of the Lord, they are not foolish endeavors.

[40:51] Fleeing wickedness and sin is not a recipe for a short life and a drab life, but rather this is the greatest way that we could live.

This is the promise of Christ for all who would trust in him. Amen. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for, well first, Lord, we thank you for the sage.

And if it is indeed Solomon who wrote this section or the entire book, Lord, we thank you for his humble honesty at the reality of human nature.

Lord, we also thank you for the example of the martyr Bishop Luom. Lord, help us if we ever find ourselves in a time of decision making where we choose to stand up for you or to crumble under the temptation of apostasy, Lord, that we would choose the former.

And Lord, we pray that you would help us to walk in the fear of you, that we would not try to self-justify ourselves or give ourselves over to self-indulgence, but entrust ourselves to your son.

[42:04] And Lord, help us by faith, trust that he has clothed us in his righteousness. To God alone be the glory. Amen. Amen. Thank you.