

Matthew 21:18-32

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[0 : 00] Our Father in heaven, will you by the power of your Spirit show us your Son. As we saw last week, as Christ rode into Jerusalem, what we call the triumphal entry, he set the stage for the end game.

He kicked off the final week of his earthly ministry. So he has been teaching for three years. It feels like, as we've walked through it, an unending stream of wisdom.

But what he teaches now will be his final instructions. And he's been sparring with the religious leaders for three years. But this will be the climax of their battle.

And he has ministered to the sick and to the broken for three years. And now he's going on to that last and final ministry that will address their deepest problem, their deepest sickness, the sin that is in their hearts on his cross.

And so here's the breakdown. You can just look at kind of the subject headings, right, in your Bible. Here's the rest of Matthew. In chapters 21 and 22, Jesus spars with the religious leaders one last time.

[1 : 40] And then in chapter 23, he addresses the crowds one last time. In chapters 24 and 25, he speaks to his disciples and teaches them one last time.

And then in chapters 26, Jesus spends the Passover with his disciples, instituting the Lord's Supper as the sign of the new covenant, even as the plot to kill him unfolds.

At the end of chapter 26 and into chapter 27, Jesus is tried and unjustly condemned. Chapter 27 ends with his crucifixion and his burial.

And in chapter 28, well, if you've not heard what happens next, I won't spoil that surprise for you yet. And if you have a red letter edition of the Bible, one of those Bibles that has the words of Christ in red text, you'll notice that we haven't heard this much straight from Jesus' mouth since the Sermon on the Mount.

Our Lord is about to speak. And he's about to teach us, his people. And so the day after he arrived in Jerusalem, that's what we're seeing in chapter 21 here, as king, the king, that was the whole point last week, right?

[2 : 56] After casting the merchants out of the temple, Jesus walks now back into Jerusalem. And we see one of the strangest events in his entire ministry.

And this is going to kick off that first section that we were just talking about, where his final confrontations with the religious leaders.

And he begins that confrontation in a very strange way. Look with me, Matthew 21, 18. In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry.

And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, May no fruit ever come from you again.

And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither at once? And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, If you have faith and do not doubt, You will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, But even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, It will happen.

[4 : 15] Whatever you ask in prayer, You will receive if you have faith. Now, how many times in recent months Have we come to the book of Matthew And asked, Is that what you would expect next?

Is this where you would take that conversation? How would you respond? And how many times have we watched Jesus Just confound our expectations? That's been one of my joys In preaching through Matthew.

Jesus keeps pushing against my expectations. And I mean, I've read Matthew before. But it's still fresh and new and surprising. The unexpected Jesus. The challenging Jesus. The surprising Jesus. Our Lord is unlike anyone, Anything in all of creation. Because He stands above and apart from His creation.

And so when He enters His world, He sets everything on its head. Now, we have been getting used to Jesus confounding and surprising us.

[5 : 27] But this, this passage, What on earth is this? Right? This must be the strangest thing.

As far as I can tell, It is the only destructive miracle In Christ's ministry. Right? As far as I can tell, It's the only miracle of judgment. And why is it directed at a tree?

Now, at first glance, It looks like Jesus is being a jerk to a tree. Right? I mean, that's what it looks like. Now, we just saw the triumphal entry.

Right? Palm Sunday. We just saw the temple cleansing. Flipping tables and driving out merchants In His Father's house of prayer. Why would He go from such direct, Public, royal ministry To this private, He's only with His disciples, Cryptic, And just weird moment.

I mean, what kind of sermon Are you going to get from Jesus judges a tree? That's the question I've been asking all week. And then we go further down the rabbit hole.

[6 : 39] Jesus tells His disciples, They will do the same And more. Remind me, Which chapter in the book of Acts Does that happen?

Have you heard of anyone in church history Withering a tree? And how many fig trees have you withered lately? I didn't know that was the measure of my growth as a disciple.

I have withered no trees this week. Or ever. And how many mountains have you cast into the sea? Of all the unexpected moments In the Gospel of Matthew, And there have been many, This must be the strangest.

So how do we sort it out? Well, the first thing is to remember That we are not Matthew's initial audience. We don't live in an agrarian culture.

Let alone a near eastern agrarian culture. Fig trees are not a normal part of my life. And I'm willing to bet they're not a part of yours On a day-to-day basis. But Matthew's audience, And like every human being Prior to the Industrial Revolution, So most of humanity ever, Right?

[7 : 59] Did live in an agrarian society. They did understand fruit trees. And especially those in the Near East Understood fig trees. So if you're not a botanist, Or a horticulturist, Or a first century Israelite, Like me, Some context is in order for us.

Here's how the experts tell us That fig trees grow in that region. First, Figs sprout in the spring, Around the time of the Passover.

Then, The leaves come after the figs, Towards the summer. So, When you see a fig tree, Full of leaves, You can expect ripe figs.

And so here's the scene That is confronting Jesus. The Passover, Again, It occurs in the spring, Easter time. So it's not fig season yet. In fact, Mark's gospel Specifically points out It was not the season for figs.

So all of the fig trees On the Mount of Olives Are bare. And in that forest Of bare branches, A solitary tree Stands flush with leaves early.

[9 : 12] Almost boastful, Defiant In its vibrancy. And yet, Despite its appearance, It's not full of life. It's a sham. It happened to put on leaves early, But never budded the figs.

It budded the leaves Instead of the figs. There's no fruit. And the purpose of a fig tree Is figs, Not leaves.

Right? Figs for food, Figs for carrying on the species. The tree looks Vibrantly outward. But if all fig trees followed, After this example, The species would go extinct.

It appears like life, But it is death. Right? No sustenance, No seeds for future generations. And in this tree, Jesus sees a metaphor.

A symbol of the kind Of spiritual life On display Among the chief priests, Scribes, Pharisees, And Sadducees. And that's the introduction To this next section Where he confronts them One last time.

[10 : 17] Right? They have leaves, So to speak. The outward signs Of spiritual flourishing. They ministered in the temple. They were among The most outwardly religious people On the planet.

They had well-developed schools Of religious thought. They had received The most substantial scriptures Of any culture In the world. And they followed them Rigorously.

But they mistook All the outward signs Of religion. The leaves For inward renewal. Right?

The truth of the thing. The very marrow. The life. The figs. Now, It's possible To look like A religious person.

To go through The motions vigorously. But to have no life In yourself. Right? To keep a lid on sin. To attend church.

[11 : 15] To look respectable. But to never have tasted The goodness of God. To have no actual Spiritual life. To have never Marveled at his grace.

To have never actually Prayed one real prayer. To have never delighted In his gospel. It's simple To be a tree Full of leaves With no fruit.

Without life. All it takes Is hard work. People are good at that. Right? Make sure your church Attendance is good. Make sure your language Is clean. Make sure you aren't Caught looking at porn.

The outward leafy Signs of a good fig tree. But that's to mistake The cause and the effect. Fig trees don't get figs From leaves. The leaves follow.

And Christians Don't earn God's love By going to church And cleaning up their act. They don't produce Spiritual life that way. Those things follow.

[12 : 20] Flow from the new life. Christians first Receive God's love. His offer of grace To be forgiven. To be born again. Filled with his spirit.

And out of that They walk with him. So of course They go to church And restrain their tongue And grow in generosity. And all the rest. As they walk with God They grow to look like him.

And the religious establishment Had every manifestation Outwardly Of religion. But they had missed the heart. They maintained the temple Of the Lord And rejected his Messiah.

They taught the people About God. But despised And opposed Emmanuel. God With them. Oh the irony. And so this fig tree Outwardly Exuding vitality But truly Barren Not only represents Their condition But Also their future.

Withered Under the judgment Of God And just as we gain Some clarity On that symbol Jesus Drives us Once more To confusion Verse 21 Jesus answered them Truly I say to you If you have faith And do not doubt You will Not only do What has been done To the fig tree But even if you say To this mountain Be taken up And thrown into the sea It will happen And whatever you ask In prayer You will receive If you have faith What?

[13 : 57] I I thought the fig tree Was a symbol But Christ's disciples Will Do Not only what Was done to the fig tree Which means They'll Cursed trees Will also Cast mountains Into the sea And receive Whatever we ask In prayer Just When it feels Like we've arrived At some stability And an understanding Of what he's doing He moves the ground Under our feet Or Apparently tells us To move the grounds As we cast the mountain I don't get it Right?

How about we understand this? Is Jesus Telling his disciples And likely us By extension That they're going To now perform Magnificent displays?

Right? Up till now Christ's miracles Have been Productive Healings And feedings And calming storms They've all been Helpful Are his miracles And the miracles That his disciples Are going to now do Are they going to turn Into signs And showmanship?

Because that's kind of What this looks like Or perhaps Is this You know The beginning Of the end times Judgment And we're going to do Some of the punishing I think not Just as the fig tree Is a metaphor So too is the mountain Here's what I think It means In the ancient world The sea Was considered A place of chaos And danger To be cast Into it Was symbolically A severe judgment See it was remote Not only to be killed But to be killed Apart from humanity It was chaotic And destructive To be plunged Into the maelstrom Into that chaos Right?

And those ideas Run throughout scripture Most recently We've seen that In Matthew chapter 18 In Matthew 18 6 Jesus said Whoever causes One of the These little ones Who believe in me To sin It would be better For him To have a great Millstone Fastened around His neck And to be drowned In the depths Of the sea When Jesus gave us That analogy We recognized It as As a symbolic Sentence What you've done Deserves death And what you've done Deserves to be taken Far from the land Of the living What you've done Deserves to be buried In the depths And never spoken of Or seen or heard of Again And so When we hear Jesus again Say Cast something Into the sea That shouldn't Make us Really think of Visible signs And wonders He's not telling us That we're going To perform magic tricks He's saying That we're going To pronounce God's judgment

[16 : 52] Just as he has And so Withering the fig tree Being cast Into the sea Both are signs Of a coming judgment And this meshes With what we're About to see In the rest of Chapters 21 and 22

Right As he confronts The sinful unbelief Of the scribes And the Pharisees And the priests And the Sadducees So Is Jesus telling us To be Judgmental Right Dan told us Earlier today About how Most non-Christians Have that idea In their heads That Christians Are just Judgmental jerks Holier than thou Can't wait To point out Everybody else's Faults Except their own I don't think We're meant To understand it That way Jesus' Mission has been And is Up to this point Redemptive Right He came not To condemn The world But to seek And to save That which is lost

Right This The smiting Kind of judgment That's not the kind Of judgment Jesus has been Bringing so far He doesn't Judge gleefully Like that angry Christian stereotype Does he He judges In sorrow With a tear In his eye In chapter 23 After he Concludes his Teaching To the crowds He's going to Turn And look over The city And say Oh Jerusalem Jerusalem The city That kills The prophets And stones Those who are Sent to it How often Would I have Gathered your Children together As a hen Gathers her brood Under her wings You are not Willing See your house Is left to you Desolate For I tell you You will not See me again Until you say Blessed is he Who comes In the name Of the lord Certainly he's Pronouncing a judgment But what is his Heart What is his Attitude It's love for them And even Now Even with This sign He confronts Them in Such a way That they Might come To repentance Look with me Verse 23 And when he Entered the Temple The chief Priests And the Elders Of the People Came up To him As he Was teaching And said By what Authority Are you Doing these Things And who Gave you This Authority Jesus Answered Them I also Will ask You One Question And if I tell You If you Tell me The answer Then I Also Will tell You By what Authority I do These Things The Baptism Of John From Where Did It Come From Heaven Or From Man And they

Discussed It Among Themselves Saying If We Say From Heaven He Will Say To Us Why Then Did You Not Believe Him But If We Say From Man We Are Afraid Of The Crowd For They All That John Was A Prophet So They Answered Jesus We Do Not!

Even As They Confront And Oppose Them What's Jesus Concern?

[20 : 29] He's Still Trying To Get Them Back To Basics To Deal With The First Things Right He's Pointing Them Back To John The Baptist Who Was The One That Said Behold The Lamb Of God Who Takes Away The Sins Of The World This Was The Prophet Who Announced The Coming Of The Messiah And It Was At John's Baptism That Heaven Opened And Testified That This Was The Christ And So Jesus Is Pointing Them Back To Basics Hear The Prophet Believe The Prophet Respond To The Prophet Repent And Look To The One That John Pointed To Jesus And So If We're To Follow Christ From The First Section In Proclaiming God's Judgment Withering The Fig Tree Cast Mountains Into The Sea We're Also To Follow Him In His Attitude

He Doesn't Delight In Their Judgment He Shows Them Their Fault While Still Pointing Them Towards! Friends That's What We Do Every Time We Share The Gospel Isn't It You Can't Tell Someone The Good News Of Jesus Christ Without Explaining The Judgment That Is To Come That's Because The Good News Of The Gospel The Center And The Heartbeat Of Christianity Begins With Bad News Doesn't It Specifically There's A God He's More Holy Than You Can Imagine And You Have Sinned Against!

So When the Apostle Paul In the Gospel Of Sorry In Ephesians Chapter 2 When he Starts Proclaiming The Gospel He Has To Start With Judgment Ephesians 2 1 You Were Dead In The Trespasses And Sins In Which You Once Walked Following The Course Of This World Following The Prince Of The Power Of The Air The Spirit That Is Now At Work In The Sons Of Disobedience Among Whom We All Once Lived In The Passions Of Our Flesh Carrying Out The Desires Of The Body And The Mind And Were By Nature Children Of Wrath Like The Rest Of Mankind The Gospel Begins With The Preaching Of Judgment It's Only Within The Context Of Condemnation That The Good News Makes Sense Because Then He Can Continue To Verse 4 But God Being Rich In Mercy Because

Of Even When We Were Dead In Our Trespasses Made Us Alive Together With Christ By Grace You Have Been Saved And Raised Us Up With Him And Seated Us With Him In The Heavenly Places In Christ Jesus When We Share The Gospel We Have To Proclaim God's Judgment The Cross Makes No Sense Unless We're Already Condemned Makes No Sense Right He Did Not Need To Stand In Our Place At An Execution Unless We Were Under The Sentence Of Death Pardon Only Comes To The Guilty Reconciliation Only Comes To The Outsider Adoption Only Comes To The Orphan Resurrection Only Comes To The Dead And So Announcing The Coming Judgment Is The Entry

Point To The Mercies Of God It's Not The Solution Unless There's A Problem It's Not A Gift Unless There's A Lack It's Not Mercy Unless There's Something To Forgive We Must Tell Them Of The Judgment So That We Can Tell Them Of The Savior No One Needs A Savior Unless They're In Trouble And So We Say Friends You Stand Contempt Run To Christ You Can Make An End Of All Your Guilt And Condemnation Now When I First Looked At This Passage And Saw Jesus Cursing A Fig Tree Well I Had No Idea What To Say This Is One Of Those Mystery Passages Right That You Kind Of Just Struggle Shoulders At And Read The Next One But But Expository Preachers Can't Do That The Next Text Is The Next!

[25 : 05] Sermon And So I Had No Idea What It Meant What I Was Supposed To Say But Evangelism Is That I That Was Not On My Radar Screen It Probably Wasn't On Yours Either Proclaiming The Judgment So That People Might Flee To The Savior That's Not Where I Thought This Was Going So Is There A Way To Test That Interpretation That Understanding Of This Text Are We Sure This Is Really About Proclaiming The Coming!

Judgment In Evangelism Can We Be Certain It's Not About Signs And Wonders Or Something Else Can We Test It I Think We Can Jesus Said Verse 21 If You Have Faith And Don't Doubt You Will Do This Now I Think We Can Assume That The Apostles Who Had Enough Faith For Martyrdom Had Sufficient Faith For This Job To Which Christ Called Them They Will Do This So We Can Look To The Apostles And See In Action Whatever Jesus Intends Here In The Book Of Acts As We Follow The Book Of Acts Records Their Ministry We Don't See Any Signs Like Withered Trees Physically Right We Don't See That Or Toppled Mountains That's Evidently Not What They Will Do We Do See One Solitary Miracle

Of Judgment Ananias And Sapphira But Even That Happens Within The Church It Doesn't Really Correspond To This But What We See That They Will Do In Abundance Is Declaring The Coming Judgment And The Cross Of Christ Is The Way Of Escape That's Kind Of The Whole Point Of The Book Of Acts It's A Book Of Missionary Activity And Jesus Says They Proclaim The Coming Judgment On The Salvation Found In Christ So That People Will Run To The Savior So Can We Test This Interpretation I Think We Can And I Think It Fits The Fig The Fig Tree The Mountain The Debate With The Priests They're All Warnings Of Judgment Prompting People To Run To The Savior And That's The Warning That Jesus Now Gives In Verse 28 The Parable The Two Sons Read With Me There Still Speaking To The Scribes And Elders And Chief Priests He Says! A Man Had Two Sons And When He Went To The First And Said Son Go And Work In The Vineyard Today And He Answered I Will Not But Afterward He Changed His Mind And Went And He That Is The Father Went To The Other Son And Said The Same And He Answered I Go Sir But Did Not Go Which Of The Two Did The Will Of The Father They Jesus Said To Them Truly I Say To You The Tax Collectors And Prostitutes Go Into The Kingdom Of God Before You For John Came To You In The Way Of Righteousness And You Did Not Believe Him But The Tax Collectors And The Prostitutes Believed Him And Even When You Saw It You

Did Not Afterward Change Your Minds And Believe! We Can Be Certain How To Understand It Makes My Job A Lot Easier But Let's Think About That For A Moment Think Back To The Times We Seen Christ Explain His Parables Who Does He Explain Them To Mark Chapter 4 Tells Us With Many Such Parables He Spoke The Word To Them That Is The Crowds And They Were Able To Hear It He Did Not Speak To Them The Crowds Without A Parable But Privately To His Own Disciples He Explained Everything According To That Testimony

[29 : 35] And If You Go And Look At All The Parables As Far As I Can Tell Every Other! Parable That Jesus Explained The Crowds Love Him Can't Get Enough Of Him But The Parables That He Preaches To Them He Does Not Explain To Them To Everyone But The Disciples He Concludes His Parables Not With An Explanation But Statements Like He Who Has Ears To Hear Let Him Hear He Explains The Parables To The Disciples All Alone But Here And Next Week There Are Two Parables Which He Explains Not To His Disciples Not To The Crowds But To Those Who Have Set Themselves Against Him He Offers His Enemies A Grace Which He Has

Reserved For His Closest Friends A Picture Of The Gospel And What Is The Content Of This Grace It's A Warning The Same Warning Right He's Saying To Them You're The Second Brother You're Pretending You're Saying Yes I Will Go And Work But You Have None Of The Substance None Of The Life Because You Didn't Believe John You Didn't Repent When He Called You To Repent And Again That's The Work Right In The Parable The Sons Are Called To Do To Repent And Believe In The One That The Father Has Sent Jesus Said Repent For The Kingdom Of Heaven Is The

The The Tax Collectors And Prostitutes In Today's Terms It's The The Abortionists The Drug Dealers The People From That Other Political Party Who Repent They Can Trust In Christ And They Can Enter The Kingdom Of God Because My Father Delights To Forgive Sinners By The Blood Of My Cross And Pour His Spirit Out On Them And You Who Have Refused To Hear Even Though You Look Good On The Outside Even Though You Spend All Your Time At The Temple Even Though You're Here Every Sunday You Will Not Receive Forgiveness Of The Spirit Or Life In The Kingdom Forever More Because You've Not Trusted In Him And Again In Pronouncing This Judgment What Is Christ's Attitude Is He Gloating Over Them And

Their Coming Judgment I Don't Think So Even On The Cross As He Hung Dying By Their Wicked Hand What Is His Attitude Towards That Father Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do These Signs Of Judgment Come From His Heart Of Grace They Are Gracious Warnings Repent The Kingdom Of God Is At Hand And So If There Is Time To Hear The Warning There Is Time To Turn To Christ Now There Is One Big Issue Still Hanging In The Air An Idea We Skipped Because I Wanted To Get Us To All Of That Before We Get To Verse 22 He Said!

To The Disciples At The End Of This Enigmatic Saying Whatever You Ask In Prayer You Will Receive If You Have Faith I Wanted To Leave This To The End Because I Wanted Us To See Both The Sign Of The Judgment And The Attitude With Which It's Given See If We Rip That Verse Out Of Context I Imagine We Can Think Of A Thousand Ways To Misinterpret And Misapply It But If We See This Passage As Christ's Instructions To Us To Give That Warning Designed To Lead Someone To Repentance We Will Know What To Pray For And How Right So Just Like The Tree And The Mountain Signs It's Not Magic God Is Not Our Genie Right If You Think God Is Your Genie And It's Giving You Leave To Turn Him Into That You've Not Read The Bible Expressions

[34 : 34] Like This Are Always Either Tied To Things Like Whatever You That Is In Conformity To My Will Or To A Specific Context Like This One In This Context I Think It Has To Do Specifically With The Warning Signs Specifically Pray That The Weight Of This Message Of A Coming Judgment Lands In Someone's Life So That They'll Repent And Find Life In Christ That Is To Say We Pray For The People With Whom We Share The Gospel That God Would Lead Them To Conviction And That He Would Drive Them To Repentance And Life And Christ Says Here The Father Will Answer That Prayer And So What Is The Impact Of All These Things How

Does This Land Today In Our Lives First If You've Not Trusted In Christ It Might Be For Two Very Different Reasons And Both Are On Display In This Passage First You Might Think That You're Like The First Son In That Parable Right Like The Prostitutes And Tax Collectors You're Too Filthy You Need To Become Like The Priests And The Scribes Outwardly Holy Before You Come To God Before You'll Be Acceptable To Him If That's Where You Are Will You Recognize Christ's Call For What It Is An Open Invitation To Turn To Him Right Where You Are Believes!

The Outward Signs Come After The Fix! Or Perhaps You Haven't Trusted In Jesus Because You Think Well Nobody's Perfect I'm Pretty Good God Will Receive Me Just As I Am If That's Where You Are Recognize That You Are Exactly Where The Stand guilty before an infinite and holy God. You owe him absolute allegiance and obedience, and your every failing is treason. You are accountable to him, and what you see as your good merit cannot overcome your guilt. Will you hear him today? Will you take this warning of condemnation seriously? Will you see your own spiritual condition before the brilliant holiness of God, like he said in verse 31, that your righteousness amounts essentially to tax collectors and prostitutes, and will you see that that bad news is actually a preface to good news? Will you cry out to him for mercy, seeing in his cross the covering of all your guilt, so that you can stand blameless before him?

That's first. Second, if you're already a Christian, will you take stock of your own soul? See, the chief priests and elders were deluded about their spiritual state.

We can be deluded too. On the one hand, we can think we're Christians just because we're in church all the time, because our families are in church all the time. We can think God loves us just because of all the stuff we do for him. If we're dependent on that, we are deluded just as the priests are, still separated from Christ. And so you can live your entire life in a church and know nothing of Christ, know plenty about him, but have never come to know him.

[38 : 56] That person needs to repent and believe, trusting in Christ alone for salvation for the very first time, so they can come to Christ and become a Christian for the first time.

And for those of us who are relying solely on Christ and his cross, we can let the priest's error practically creep into our lives as well and think, you know, I'm a little bit more acceptable than that

guy over there, right?

That guy's kind of a screw-up. And so we can think that we're something and we're nothing. Let this passage crush that thought out of our minds.

And third, will you take seriously Christ's call? He said, you will do this. Christ's call to share the message.

You will warn the fig tree and the mountain. He said, you will do that. Will you? He told the disciples that they were to spread the message, the message of judgment leading to repentance. So what will you do? What is one step?

[40 : 16] You will take, even this week, even today, to share that warning. The bad news that leads to good news.

Who's one person you will share it with? And will you, as he prompted us in verse 22, pray that that message lands and that hearts receive?

Just as you were blessed to have the gospel preached to you and imprinted on your soul. Praise be to God.

Let's pray to him. Lord, I pray that you would help us to see with clear eyes our spiritual condition apart from you.

But for anyone who needs to have that weight in the coming judgment pressed upon their soul, I pray, Lord, that you would do it.

[41 : 31] Lord, will you transform us into people who are always grateful for the gracious warning you've given and not only that, but the cross of Christ to which he is here in Matthew's gospel marching to make a way for us to be pardoned and reconciled to you.

And Lord, will you make us ambassadors of that very same message? Will you make it our delight and our joy to share the grace that has been shown to us?

Will you empower us and embolden us to share the message of bad news that leads to good of judgment that leads to repentance and blessing in Christ and whose name we pray Amen.

Would you stand with us? Amen.