

First Things First

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[0 : 00] Good morning.

Happy Mother's Day. We're going to continue in our series in the book of Ezra. If you want to pull out your pew Bibles, it's page 363.

And we're going to be looking this morning at chapter 3. And we're going to start by reading the text this morning. So if you want to turn with me, we're going to look at the next chapter in this story of God restoring and rebuilding his people.

Ezra chapter 3, starting in verse 1. When the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

Then arose Joshua, son of Josedach, and his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, with his kinsmen. And they built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

[1 : 25] They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands. And they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening.

And they kept the feast of booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required. And after that, the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord.

From the first day of the seventh month, they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food and drink and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus, king of Persia.

Now, in the second year, after the coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, the son of Josedach, made a beginning together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites, and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity.

They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upwards to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. And Jeshua, with his sons and his brothers, and Cadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of the Lord, along with the sons of Hennadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

[3 : 08] And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites sung the sons of Asaph with cymbals to praise the Lord according to the directions of David, king of Israel.

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord. For he is good, and his steadfast love endures forever towards Israel.

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping.

For the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. Will you pray with me? Amen. Lord, as we look at this text, this account from long ago, of your work in this world, of the story of your people, Lord, I pray that you would help us to see and understand, Lord, the truths in this story.

Lord, help it to come alive to us so that we might be encouraged, so that we might be challenged.

Lord, so that we might see you more clearly, so that we might hear your call distinctly, that we might

respond to you as we ought.

[5 : 02] Lord, I pray for your help this morning, Lord, that you would give me words to speak, clarity in my speaking, and Lord, that by your Holy Spirit, we might together sit under your word, and Lord, watch you, reveal yourself to us in it.

Lord, help us to be not only hearers of your word, but doers also. For Jesus' sake, we pray. Amen. Amen. So I was thinking about this time of year, 32 years ago now, which is kind of frightening. I was graduating from high school and moving on, and I was going off to college and looking forward to that, but I realized that it was a momentous occasion.

Even then, I think I had an inkling of it, and as I look back, much more so now, I realized that going off to college is often the first time in our lives when we are actually able to choose who we are, what we value, and what's important to us.

Until that point, we live in our family's houses usually, and we live under the protection and the provision and within the value system of our parents, and when we go off to college, it's the first time that we get to begin to choose what does that look like?

[6 : 33] It makes us answer the questions. What will I invest in? And what will be most important to me? And of course, this is the first step for those of us who have gotten beyond that stage.

We recognize this is the first step of doing this for the rest of our lives because then we move on to the next thing, the new city that we move to, the new relationship that we move into if we get married or the new community of friends we move into as we begin our workplace.

And it continues throughout life as your children grow up and leave the empty nest or as you find yourself in your 50s and 60s single. You find yourself in new seasons and you're always choosing. You're always deciding what's most important to me. What will my life be about? Even retirement creates another opportunity to decide what we want to do with our lives.

And I think that this connects with the story that we read from Ezra this morning. You see, remember the history of where we're at in the big picture.

[7 : 44] Going all the way back, God through Abraham in Genesis 12 said, I'm going to make you great people. And then through Moses he delivered a great people out of slavery to Egypt and brought them into the promised land and then through David raised up a kingdom and this great land.

But the people consistently found themselves unable. They chose not to believe God and to trust God and to follow God and to submit to God.

And so in this kingdom it became increasingly ungodly as the people rejected God over and over again. And so God in 586 BC brought the Babylonians to conquer Jerusalem, to raise the city, to sow salt in the fields and to export the people away from the city.

And for 50, 70 years, what is it? 70 years total, the people were in exile. They were scattered around the land. And the book of Ezra tells the story of how God has then taken people who have been shattered and scattered and is now beginning to bring them back to restore them and to rebuild them as God's people.

And what we saw in chapters 1 and 2 is how God moved the king of Persia who had now become the ruler of the land taking over the Babylonian captivity, how God had moved his heart to change the regulations and to actually give an edict to declare that the restoration of the worship of the God of the Jews in Jerusalem was a good and right thing that they had the support of the Persian emperor and the Persian empire.

[9 : 25] And so what we see then in Ezra 3, beginning in verse 1, is that the people, a first contingent, had returned to Jerusalem and they had gone to their towns and they had begun to settle in and they gathered.

But in this situation, recognize a few things. One is their needs were great. Their moving back to this land was like moving into the Wild West in the 1800s.

They were restarting from scratch and they had only what they brought with them. And though they had the political backing of the emperor of Persia, they didn't have the welcome of the people in the surrounding lands.

We'll see that next week. There's actually some resistance and opposition to them being there and doing what they were doing. They had been uprooted from their homeland and had lived far away for a long time.

Had they become more Babylonian than Jewish? Had they become more Persian than Jewish? Jewish. They'd also lived for 70 years without the structures of their relationship with God.

[10:46] There was no city, no holy city to gather to for the feasts, the three festivals every year. There was no temple to go to. There was no altar to sacrifice on.

There was none of the means by which God had given his people to relate to him were available to them for 70 years.

And even as they came back and as Greg preached last week on one and two, how much of this there were echoes of returning of the second exodus, that this is a second deliverance of God and bringing his people back to himself and back to the promised land.

recognize also though that the people were much smaller and much less wealthy. When Joshua led the people in, they were a large army and they were outnumbered at times, but they were a significant people.

They are now small and they are not able to defend themselves. Smaller in number and smaller in worth. And therefore, as it says in verse 3, they feared the people.

[12:01] Is it verse 3? Did I get that right? Yes, verse 3. They feared the people around them as they were entering in. I want you to put yourself in that position for a second.

What would you do if you were entering into a land that you felt in danger and you felt hostile?

Right? You've got a couple of things you need to build. You've got to build your home.

You've got to build some walls to protect yourself. You've got to build a temple. You've got to build an altar. Right? Those are some things for you to do. Now, if it were me, I would start with the walls because that's what I would want.

I would want protection first. Once you get the walls up, then you can start building the buildings.

And once you get the buildings up, you build the temple and then you put the altar in place because then it's got protection and then we can start doing.

So in my human mind, that would be the order that we would go in if I were part of this returning group. And yet, in the face of their fear, the people chose to do something else.

[13:11] Stephen Covey, the guru of time management in the 1980s, he's probably passé now and people don't think much of him, but back in the 1980s, he was the big deal. Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.

One of his principles is put the big rocks in your schedule. Our time is important and what we value is shown by how we spend our time and what we invest in. And it's at times when we're most afraid often that we see the things that are most important to us and where we invest our time.

And the people of Israel under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Yeshua started in an unlikely place.

And in that, I think we see some things for ourselves to learn about what is most important for God's people. So that's where we want to go today is look at what's most important for God's people.

We're going to look at two different things, two different sections of the passage, one through seven. We're going to see that they set themselves apart for worship. and then we're going to look at eight through 13 and look at how they set their hearts on God's glory.

[14:23] And then we're going to think about what this means for us today. So that's where we're going. Look with me again at verses one through seven and think about what is it as they in this fear began to do things, what did they do first?

And you see it in verse two, right? As they gathered and the seventh month by the way, they gathered at the timing because the seventh month was kind of like it would have been like Easter or a Christmas, a high point in the church calendar so to speak for the Jewish people in the Old Testament.

It was the month in which the Day of Atonement fell. It was the month during which the Feast of Booths fell. And it was one of the three times of the year where the people were meant to gather in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and worship God.

And as they returned the land, it seems they were there for a little while and then this month came and they gathered in Jerusalem and as they gathered, they built an altar.

They didn't build walls. They didn't build the temple. But they started by building the altar so that they could offer up sacrifices to God as he had instructed them in Leviticus and Numbers so long ago.

[15 : 48] And as they had done for many years in the tabernacle and then in the temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem, they started with this because in their fear they knew that the most important thing was being right with God.

the most important thing was to honor God because he would be their refuge and he would be their protector. There's lots of resonance in the timing of this.

When you think about the Day of Atonement, if you remember the Day of Atonement was a time when the high priest would come and bring two goats, right, and he would sacrifice one and his blood would be shed and the other one he would lay his hand on and representing the sins of the people and then the goat would be sent out into the wilderness far away.

And in both of these pictures, you see God saying, you may not approach me, a holy God, on your own, but I am going to graciously make a way for you to approach me.

And through this sacrificial system, these were pointers and signs of how it would be that we might approach a holy God. The Feast of Booths and in-gathering that says that they celebrated was a time of both celebrating the harvest and God's provision and think about how sweet that would be.

[17 : 17] After 70 years in exile, they've come back and they're actually celebrating the harvest. Now, it's not clear how much harvest they had that year because they hadn't been there for a full year of agriculture yet.

And yet, God asked them, celebrate my provision. And my faithfulness to you. And remember, too, that the Feast of Booths was enacted so that they would remember how God carried them through the wilderness after the exodus, how they lived in tents and these booths, these makeshift houses, so that they would remember that their security is not in those things, but in the Lord.

And then, interestingly enough, as the author writes about this, he doesn't camp out a lot on the Day of Atonement, which is what I really wanted to preach to you guys about this morning, but it's not in the text, so we didn't talk about it.

You can go back and read it in the Old Testament. It's a great thing. But he says over and over again, what they offered was the burnt offerings. The burnt offerings were given over and over and over again.

Why? Because the burnt offerings were offerings of consecration. That is, they were offerings to say to the Lord, Lord, I am wholly yours.

[18 : 36] They were, the people brought that, those offerings, those burnt offerings on a daily basis to remind themselves and to say to God, God, you are our God and we are your people and we will not worship anyone else.

And as they did this, you see the repetition of and they did this as it was written. They were doing this under God's instruction. They did not come and say, God, hey, it's a new day.

You know, we've been away for 70 years. Why don't we kind of spice things up and do some things differently? I've liked, I'd like to think about some worship doing it this way. He says, no. Instead, what you see is them saying, God, we're going to return to your word and to submitting to your instructions that we cannot worship you as we want to, but we are called to worship you as you have called us to.

And this is what you see as they're returning. Their priority was not safety, but being right with God and establishing the worship of God as he had instructed.

So that's really what you see in verses one through seven is the establishment as the people come together in this month, what they say is the most important thing is that we're going to worship God the way he told us to.

[20 : 05] But then you see that there's more that the writer brings out today because he says, okay, so they built the altar, but then the foundations were not laid. And it says, so they sent out some work orders, they did a little comparison shopping with contractors, they found some guys up in Tyre and Sidon who had really good building materials in Cyprus, and so they planned and then returned again the beginning of the next year, the second month, and they came back and they laid the foundation of the temple.

And in this amazing story, there's a lot about the organization of setting up the Levites and priests, but I think that the high point of it is in verses 11 and 12 because as they build this temple, and they haven't even built the building yet, Nick's going to preach on that in like three, two weeks, no, Greg's going to preach on it in two weeks, they haven't even built the whole temple, they just laid the foundation, but as they laid the foundation, they gathered in song and praise, and part of what

would strike a Jewish writer as they were listening to this is that this is the same story, in fact, these are the exact same words, for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever, that were said two other times in the story of the Old Testament.

The first one was when King David had recaptured the Ark of the Covenant, remember the Ark of the Covenant which was this box that they carried around that had all these signs of God's faithfulness, the Ten Commandments, the rod and staff, manna, they carried around things that were reminding them of how God has been faithful to them and how he was, had set a covenant relationship whereby they might be his people and he would be their God.

And as this Ark of the Covenant is regained from the Philistines and brought into Jerusalem, in 1 Chronicles 16, 34, they gather the singers and in almost the same vocabulary, the cymbals and the trumpets, the Levites and the priests, they celebrate the goodness of God and they offer burnt offerings to the Lord.

and then the second place that you see this is in 2 Chronicles chapter 5, verse 13 and this is when Solomon has actually built a temple in which they're going to worship God and all the instructions that God had given them in all of its fullness.

[22 : 50] 2 Chronicles 5, 13 says this, when the song was raised and the trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments and praise to the Lord for he is good for his steadfast love endures forever.

The house, the house of the Lord was filled with a cloud so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.

You see, friends, in the Old Testament for the people of God, the temple was the place where the glory of God, the presence of God, the very radiance and manifestation of all of his qualities and his characters that God created the temple to be the meeting place between God and man, between God and humanity that as we get, that this would be the place where he would choose to manifest himself and dwell among his people.

and this glory was the sweetest thing for the people of Israel that God himself dwelt in their midst. And yet, now what we have is these people returning from exile and they'd not had that presence and there was no place of that glory. And so, even the laying of the foundation caused them to praise God in hopes that God was with them and that God would renew his relationship with them and be among them.

[24 : 34] And yet, you see in verse 12 how this is mixed even from the very start because the older men, those who had been around, those who had seen this temple that Solomon had built with its great glory, they knew that the former house would have greater glory than the one that they were building.

It's kind of like going from a Lincoln to a Yugo. Yugos aren't around anymore. A Lincoln to a Cooper, Mini Cooper. You guys like Mini Coopers. What's a good example? It's like, it's like going from a Lincoln Navigator to a Ford Fiesta.

Are we getting there? Right? It still works. It still does what it's supposed to do. But it's smaller and far less glorious.

And the people grieved because they knew that the loss of that glory was because of their own sin. It had been their national disobedience that had caused it. and yet they longed for that past glory. And the words that Julie read earlier from the book of Haggai. Haggai is one of the prophets who is ministering to the people of God during this very time. And in fact, it seems that these words came right after chapter three, probably, where they need encouragement to keep going and to not give in to the despair.

[26 : 13] Just to reread again what was read earlier from Haggai, the prophet as he speaks to the people. Work, that is work in building this temple for I am with you declares the Lord according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.

My spirit remains in your midst. Fear not for thus says the Lord of hosts, yea, once more in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land and I will shake all the nations so that the treasures of all nations shall come in and I will fill this house with glory says the Lord of hosts.

The silver is mine and the gold is mine declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former says the Lord of hosts. And so, these old men thinking back to Solomon's temple are weeping because they see the lack of it.

They see this sense of incomplete restoration of what had been before and God comes and he says, I'm not done and though this is what, this is the temple you will have now, there is a greater glory that I have for you and my presence is still with you and my spirit is still with you and you do not need to be afraid.

In some ways, what we see in all of this chapter is a bit like a marriage renewal ceremony.

[27 : 43] A couple who've been married for 25 years maybe walked through really hard things, maybe thought, is this worth it? God is bringing them back together and the people of God are coming to the God of Israel and saying, we renew our vows and God is saying, I am going to be faithful to you.

I will, the people are saying, we will not run after other gods. We will forsake all others till death do us part. and God is saying, I am inviting you into this relationship with me where you will find the glory that you long for and that your soul hungers and thirsts for.

It is a marriage renewal covenant where to say, to be in relationship with you is to taste of your glory. So this is what's going on in 536 BC.

God is renewing and restoring and we'll see. God's not done yet. He's going to build the temple. He's going to bring the law. He's going to renew the sacrament. He's going to rebuild the city. God's rebuilding is just beginning. But in it, we see that God's people have made the worship of God their priority and the glory of God their longing and their heart.

[29 : 24] So, what do we do with that? That's great. It's a long time ago in a very physical picture of how to do these things. What do we do with this? I want to just locate this in the biblical story a little bit and help you see some of the threads because I hope you hear that what God is doing with this particular people is an example and a foretaste of the greater things that would come.

You see, because God is in the business of gathering in wandering exiles. God is in the business of bringing back to himself men and women from every tribe and tongue and nation across the land who, because of their sin, are estranged and exiled from him and are not dwelling in relationship with him and are not experiencing his glory.

We see that what God is doing in the world is he is building a new temple, a temple that is not a place, not this building, it's not this edifice, it's not the thing we're going to build next door.

That's not where God's temple dwells. But God's temple is his people, his people built on a cornerstone, the cornerstone being Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We see these pictures in the scriptures. Jesus himself, while he was on earth, told the Pharisees, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

[31 : 09] He was talking about himself and his own body that would be destroyed by death and yet raised to new life for us and for the beginning of this new people that wouldn't simply be about the descendants of Abraham but would be for all people everywhere.

And then the apostle Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2 that that Jesus then becomes the cornerstone and that we are being built as his people into a living temple.

That we are meant to be the building blocks of the temple of God. That is, we are the place as we gather in relationship with one another in this world where God displays his glory and where the meeting place between God and man is in this world.

The very center of God's work in this era is that the church that is the people of God gathered and scattered are, is the place where God is meeting with humanity.

It is the very center of it. And so we don't have to go to a place with an altar and sacrifice burnt offerings. We don't have to find goats and bulls to do these things anymore.

[32 : 34] But what God calls us to do is to make his people, his church, the priority in our lives. This is the most important thing about me.

And we don't have sacrifices to be repeated because we know that the sacrifice, all those sacrifices pointed ahead to the once for all sacrifice of Jesus.

That he has taken the sin and the guilt and the judgment. He is sent into the exile of death so that he can be brought back in new life and restore forever our relationship with him.

He is both the sacrifice and the scapegoat who both dies and is cut off and sent out into the wilderness so that we might be brought in by faith in him.

So briefly, how do we apply this to our lives? Well, the first is we make the worship of God our priority.

[33 : 42] that is, there are sacrifices for us to make. Romans 12.1 tells us this, I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercy of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

when we join with Christ by faith, he calls us to say, lay it all down before me.

All that you have, all of your life, put it on the altar, make it mine, give it to me and let me do what I want with it. There are kinds of specific sacrifices that flow from this that we see in the New Testament.

Ephesians 2 says, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God. Our loving others is a sacrifice to God just as Jesus' sacrifice was a loving act for us.

And so, are we willing to make that a priority in our lives? Or do we allow ourselves to become distracted and selfish and fearful and think that we have to spend our energies building our own walls instead?

[35 : 08] Hebrews 13, 15 and 16 points to another kind of sacrifice. Through him, that is through Christ, then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Do we make praise to God the thing that we most long for in our lives?

Or do we really wish deep down that God would let us get some of that praise too? That people would think really well of us and praise us and think us important?

Are we willing to make the praising of God the greatest joy of our hearts?

And then also, there is a sacrifice of submission to God's word. That is, there is a sacrifice of our independence. Just as the people followed the instructions of Moses and said, as it is written, we too are called to sacrifice our independence and even our own sense of what is right and wrong at times to submit to the God of the universe who has revealed himself in the Bible.

[36 : 33] And so, we live lives of ethical purity, of morality, but more than that, we live lives that seek to honor God and do things his way in humility and in graciousness and in patience and in kindness and in perseverance.

So, there are many sacrifices that God does call us to make, but they all flow from the fundamental sacrifice of saying, God, my life is not my own.

You have bought it with the price of Jesus Christ. Glorify me. Glorify you, Lord, in my life, whatever that means.

Help me to love. Help me to praise you. It also means that we set our hearts on the glory of God.

And friends, it's so easy for us to want glory for ourselves because, of course, you know, we were made for glory and we experience this on a regular basis, that we were made to be caught up in something greater than ourselves, something more transcendent and more wonderful and bigger than ourselves.

And it's the thing that we taste in all sorts of little ways. It's the thing that we taste when your sports team wins game seven of the series and you think, woo, you get caught up in that glory of, we won, even though you're just a spectator, but we won and you get caught up in something bigger than yourself.

[38 : 10] It's the glory of the honor of your country acting for good and battling evil in the world. It's the honor in your work. It's the glory in your work of a job well done and successfully done.

It's the glory that we taste when we go to the Rockies and we sit on the shore of Bierstadt Lake and look at the crags as they rise above us on a beautiful summer day.

It's the glory that we feel in the swell of Mozart's Requiem. All of these are tastes of glory that help us know that as human beings we are made for glory, but these aren't the substance of them.

These are the signposts. These are the, this is the taste at the mall where you get, hey, do you want a taste so you can have the whole meal? That's what we're getting in these, right?

Four tastes and shadows that point to a greater reality, a greater reality of a glory that we will never be able to manufacture and never be able to, but a glory that seeks us out in Jesus Christ and comes and finds us and invites us in to his glory.

[39 : 21] And in the glory of God we find his worthiness, that he is good and his steadfast love endures forever. that the God of the Bible will come to us with all of this goodness and invite us to say, come and live, sit and soak and absorb and revel and rejoice and sing in my glory.

And not only do we find his worthiness, but we also find his weightiness. we find that God is so great that as we set our hearts on him and as we drink from his goodness and as we taste of his faithfulness and as we sing his praises, our hearts are tuned for more of it and we find that he is able to carry that weight that our greater desires that continue to increase find that God is able to carry all of those things.

John Hanks and I were talking about this yesterday and he reminded me of, there was a Veritas Forum a couple years ago where Shelley Kagan who is a professor of philosophy, the head of the department and very highly respected, was in a discussion with N.T. Wright and at one point the topic of eternity came up and Shelley Kagan says, I don't want, this is a paraphrase, I don't want to live forever because everything that I desire and everything that I enjoy eventually disappoint me and I would hate to live forever, that would be horrible.

Friends, the weight of God's glory is that we will continue to plumb the depths of his goodness and his mercy of his grace and his love of his power and his majesty and his beauty for the rest of our lives and we will never be disappointed.

In fact, it will lead us into eternity and we will feel like the prodigal son who has come home from eating the swine's food into the household of the father where we have a ring and a robe and sandals and a party where we sing praises and are caught up in this glory of being with God.

[41 : 49] and Jesus will not disappoint. And we, like the old men in the Old Testament today, look with, through a dark, through a glass darkly.

We don't see the fullness of that glory even now. We've tasted it. We know it's real but we know that there's a glory yet to come. we know that one day with unveiled faces we will see him and we will be like him and the glory of God will fill the earth as he renews ultimately the people of God to the place of God where they enjoy the presence of God forever and his glory will fill the heavens and the earth.

Amen. When we've been there 10,000 years bright shining as the sun we've no less days to sing his praise than when we first begun.

Friends, this is what Ezra 3 tells us is most important about being the people of God. Will you make it the thing that's most important for you today?

Let's pray. Lord, we have touched on things that are greater than words.

[43 : 33] We have spoken of things that Lord, are too high for us to fully comprehend. and yet Lord, we know that in this text Lord, you point us to yourself that you are worthy of our worship and Lord, that in you we find the glory that our hearts long for.

The glory that magnifies you in all of your greatness. Lord, help us to taste and see that you are good and Lord, help us to order our lives that we might pursue these things above all else.

Lord, free us from our fears and the things that keep us from pursuing these things. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.