

The Joy of God's Word

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Date: 21 July 2019

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[0 : 00] is a good prayer as we prepare to approach God's Word. Would you turn with me to Nehemiah? Nehemiah chapter 8. If you are looking in the Pew Bible, it is after Ezra, before Esther, page 375. It's good to be back from vacation.

Thank you all for the ways that you are supportive of each of us as pastors getting away with our families for sometime each summer. It's a blessing to be able to do so. But we are continuing in our series in the book of Nehemiah, reading chapter 8 today.

I'm going to read the entire chapter as we begin. Nehemiah chapter 8, beginning at verse 1. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate.

And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it, facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the heirs of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

And beside him stood Mattathiah, Shema, Eneiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Masaiah on his right hand, and Padaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashem, Hashbadanah, Zechariah, and Mishalom on his left hand.

[1 : 49] And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also, Joshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akub, Shabbathai, Hodiah, Masaiah, Kelita, Azariah, Josabad, Hanan, Peleah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places.

They read from the book from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who is the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep, for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy.

Do not be grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and drink, and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

On the second day, the heads of fathers' houses of all the people with the priests and the Levites came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law. And they found it written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem. Go out into the hills, and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths as it is written. So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths.

[4 : 03] For from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the rule. This is God's word. What are some things that bring you joy and delight? For myself, I can think of a few things, many of which I've experienced recently.

I can think of natural beauty, looking up at towering trees, driving through rolling hills, seeing refreshing waters. I think of friendship. Recently I've had the opportunity to have good, long conversations with friends who I hadn't seen in several months or years.

I think of generosity, the feeling of receiving an unexpected and yet thoughtful and generous gift. I think of food. I like food. Slow-cooked chicken on a charcoal grill, a fresh salad with homemade dressing, an ice cream cone. I think of the joys of family, getting a bear hug or a snuggle from one of my kids or seeing them weather a challenge that a year ago might have thrown them off track. I think of accomplishing something when we finally reached Columbus, Ohio after we had left Jackson, Mississippi at 3.30 that morning. Yes, we did a lot of driving in the last couple weeks. There are all kinds of things in God's creation, large and small, that bring us joy, that refresh us, that give us energy and strength to keep on going in our lives. But this morning's passage shows us an even greater and more enduring source of joy, and that is the Word of God. What we'll see in our passage this morning is that understanding and obeying God's Word brings joy. Verses 1 to 12, we'll see how understanding God's Word brings joy, and then verses 13 to 18, we'll see how obeying God's Word. It brings, produces joy. So first, understanding God's Word produces joy. Now, before we jump in, let me remind you of where we are in Ezra and Nehemiah. The book of Ezra began with the rebuilding of the temple, restoring the worship of God, and the book of Nehemiah began with rebuilding of the city and its walls carrying out the work of God. But in both books, after they finish these major projects, they turn to the Word of God. And these next three chapters, Nehemiah 8 through 10, focus on the people's response to God's Word. Today, we'll see that the Word of God produces great rejoicing over God's grace. Next week, we'll see that the Word of God produces godly sorrow.

[7 : 07] The people recognize their sin and how they've fallen short. And then in chapter 10, we'll see that the Word of God produces covenant renewal. In other words, a renewed resolve to obey.

Now, let me make a brief digression before we jump further in, but just to let you know about a scholarly issue. So, some scholars have looked at these three chapters, Nehemiah 8 through 10, and they've noticed some parallels with the second half of Ezra, Ezra 7 through 10, because in both cases, Ezra comes on the scene, he comes to teach the people, and he leads them in repentance and renewal of their covenant with God. And these scholars also noticed that so far, the book of Nehemiah has focused on Nehemiah. But in these three chapters, Nehemiah fades into the background. Ezra appears for the first time, and Nehemiah only becomes prominent again in chapter 12 and 13.

Now, for these reasons and some other reasons, some scholars have suggested that chronologically, Nehemiah 8 through 10 should actually describe what happened in Ezra 7 through 10, that it fits right between Ezra 8 and 9, and these chapters ended up here for thematic rather than chronological reasons. Now, it's true that Ezra and Nehemiah is not always arranged in strict chronological order.

Sometimes the author arranges things thematically. So, we can't just throw this theory out in principle, but on balance, whenever scholars have attempted to cut and paste portions of the Bible and say, this part doesn't really belong where it is, it really belongs somewhere else, or when they've proposed what they call emendations, which basically means rewriting a word or phrase, with little or no actual textual evidence, they almost always end up creating more problems than they solve. So, for one thing, Nehemiah's name appears right here in verse 9, and then again in chapter 10, verse 1. And as far as we know, Nehemiah wasn't there when Ezra first came to Jerusalem 13 years ago, as was recorded in the book of Ezra. So, that's a problem for this theory. The main thing is, just because Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 BC and taught God's word to the people and led them in repentance and said, you need to change, doesn't mean that he ain't going to come back 13 years later and do about the same thing. We always need to hear God's word, and we probably always need to keep changing. Ezra might have been in Jerusalem all along, preaching for 13 years, or he might have gone back to Persia. We don't know what he did in between.

[9 : 47] But either way, I think we can be fairly confident that these chapters belong just where they are, both thematically and chronologically. Now, end of brief scholarly digression, back to the main point. Understanding God's word produces great joy. Notice how the chapter begins.

The people want to hear the word. They gather together. They tell Ezra, bring the book. Read to us. Teach us. And notice in verse 1, the book is described both as the law of Moses, in other words,

indicating that the Bible was written by human authors in their native languages, in their own cultural and historical context, and it is also what the Lord commanded Israel.

The Bible, at the very same time, is God's inspired and infallible, and we would even say inerrant word. That simply means it's entirely trustworthy and divinely authoritative in all that it affirms.

Now, this wasn't a completely spontaneous gathering. It wasn't like the people were just hanging out and said, hey, Ezra, come and tell us something. No, verse 4 tells us they had constructed a wooden platform that was big enough for Ezra and 13 other guys who were helping him.

So, most likely, they had designated a place large enough to accommodate all the people. You know, they didn't meet in the temple. Ezra's preaching on the street here. He's preaching in the park, right? And they set up a stage. There's plenty of space. For everybody to come, it'd be like preaching on the New Haven Green or some other large outdoor space. But the people wanted to be there.

[11 : 31] And they wanted to hear the word. And notice that everyone was there. Verse 1 says, all the people gathered as one man, that is in unity. Twelve times in this chapter, Ezra, the people are referred to using the word all. All the people. Verse 2, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard. So, it wasn't just the men. It wasn't just the adults.

But all who could understand. Now, children, I know there are some of you here. I want you to look up at me for a moment if you are a child. God has a message for you when you come to church. Now, some of you might hear that message at times in your classes next door. But I want all the children to know that God has a message for you when we are gathered here in this room. When someone stands up here and reads from the Bible or when the pastor preaches, God is speaking to all of us, and that includes you. So, for one thing, pay attention. Now, I know for some of you, it might be really hard to pay attention for the whole long sermon. That's okay. You know what? Some of the adults can't pay attention for the whole sermon either. But here's what you can do. Start by listening for one or two things in the pastor's sermon each week. When you hear something that seems important, if you can write it down, if you've learned to write, you can write it down on your bulletin or if you have a notebook, or you could draw a picture. So, today you could draw a picture of Ezra standing on a stage and his 13 helpers, even if you want to draw all those guys, who were helping him to read the Bible to the people. Now, there might be things you don't understand, and that's okay too, but the more you listen, the more you will understand as you grow older. And if you have trouble understanding, you can always ask your parents. You can say, what was the pastor preaching about today? I was trying to understand and I was having some trouble.

Or you can come to me or to Pastor Matt or Pastor Nick. You can always ask us, what were you preaching about today, no matter what your age is? All right? All right. So, everyone was there, men, women, and all the children who are old enough to understand.

And they paid attention, not just for 30 to 45 minutes, but for six hours from early morning to midday. That was a long reading. That was a... And they were serious. Probably that's why Ezra had 13 helpers, so they could take turns, so his voice wouldn't get tired out because he didn't have a microphone. Now, it takes about 12 hours if you read straight through the law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. So, he wouldn't have gotten all the way through, and they stopped to explain it, but they could have gotten through some substantial chunks of it. So, people wanted God's Word. They all gathered together. They honored God's Word. Verse 5 and 6 shows how they honored God's Word by standing in verse 5, by lifting up their hands to God in praise, by bowing down to the ground in humility. In verse 6, the people treated God's Word like they would have treated a king who had come to visit them, acknowledging God's speaking to them through His Word. There was a sense of reverent expectation. And then verse 7, we see that there was another group of helpers, the Levites, who helped the people to understand the law. It seems like the Levites sort of went back and forth. This is probably a crowd of several thousands of people. We don't know exactly how many, but there were about 50,000, 40, 50,000 who had returned from exile, settled in Jerusalem, at least at the beginning.

[15 : 41] We don't know exactly how many there were here, how many gathered here. But again, likely several thousand, and there were these 13 or perhaps even more Levites who would have circulated in the crowd, answering people's questions or giving further explanation. And verse 8 summarizes what happens.

They read from the book, from the law of God, clearly. That's probably referring to Ezra and his helpers up front who read the scrolls, and second half of the verse, and they gave the sense so that

the people understood the reading. That's probably referring to the work of the Levites who were sort of circulating among the people when they paused in the reading. Now, the word clearly in verse 8 literally means distinctly or separately. So, it could mean that they articulated clearly, so that people could understand their words, or it could also mean that they read part by part, section by section, as we read chapter by chapter. Now, either way, throughout this section, we see the importance not just of reading and hearing the word of God, but also systematically explaining and teaching it. And this is one of the reasons why our normal practice at Trinity is to preach through entire books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, section by section.

Okay, we don't just preach random verses or themes that happen to come to my mind during the week, or one of the other pastor's minds. We want to honor the word of God by intentionally and thoroughly exposing ourselves to it and letting it speak to us in all its parts.

Then, verse 9 to 12, we see the people's response to God's word. Now, their first response in verse 9 is to weep. It says, all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

Why did they weep? Well, most likely because God's law... because they realized we haven't obeyed this law. Boy, we didn't even pay attention to some of this. We've been neglecting and disobeying God for years.

[17 : 56] Now, as we'll see in the next chapter, there are times and places for weeping, mourning, fasting, praying, repenting in response to the word of God. So, this is not an inappropriate response to God's word. But notice, Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites respond in what I thought was a rather surprising way. They say, don't weep. You see, three times. They say, don't weep or mourn. Don't be grieved. No, they say, this day is holy. In other words, it's a day that's set apart to the Lord.

Now, notice in verse 1, it says it was the first day of the seventh month. And if you read in Leviticus, the first day of the seventh month is called the Feast of Trumpets. So, they would sound the trumpets throughout the land, and the people were required to gather together for an assembly.

And why did they sound the trumpets? Well, they were probably sounded for three reasons, sort of a past, present, and future reason. They were a reminder of when God had spoken to the people on Mount Sinai, and they saw the fire of God come down on the mountain, and they heard the loud blast of a trumpet. So, it was reminding them that God had spoken to them in the past, and it was summoning them. The trumpets, I mean, you've got to pay attention to a trumpet, right? Trumpets playing, you can't stay asleep. It means you've got to get up. They're a summons saying, come and hear the Word of God. And also, the trumpets were in anticipation of a day when God would come and reveal Himself in power once more. The New Testament says when Jesus comes again, He will come with a loud blast of a trumpet.

So, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites told the people, this is a day to celebrate. To celebrate.

Because it's a day to remember the grace and provision and revelation of God.

He says, it's not just a day to lament how unworthy you are and focus on all the ways that you've failed. He says, no, it's a way to remember the overwhelming grace and provision of God that He has spoken to you. And He has chosen you and set His love on you. God has spoken to us. God has saved us. God has sustained us. And God will bring to completion what He has begun. So, Nehemiah says, it's a day to eat the best food. And drink sweet drinks. Make it a party. And don't be selfish about it. He says, bring portions to anyone who doesn't have or hasn't prepared. Now, isn't this why we gather together every Sunday?

[20 : 42] Why do we meet on Sundays? We meet on Sundays for one reason. Because Jesus Christ triumphed over death and rose from the dead and began the new creation on that resurrection Sunday morning.

And ever since then, Christians have gathered on Sunday to remember and to proclaim and to celebrate that and to anticipate what He's going to do in the future. We know that because Jesus lives, we too shall live and we can go from here to bring the feast to others. Verse 10 says, the joy of the Lord is your strength. That word strength can also mean sort of stronghold or protection. And interestingly, the Apostle Paul says a similar thing in Philippians chapter 3. He says, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. And he says, to write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Isn't that so interesting? He says, it's safe for you or a safeguard for you to be rejoicing in the Lord. How is the joy of the Lord a safeguard or a protection or our stronghold? Well, the joy of the Lord protects us from being overwhelmed by our own problems, our own failures, our own anxieties, and every, all the crud in the world around us. The joy of the Lord points us out of ourselves toward the God who has revealed himself to us and saved us, and it points us to the glory

and beauty and strength and joy of God himself. In fact, those are four of the words that are most commonly associated with God's holiness in the Bible. Glory, beauty, strength, and joy. And when the joy of the Lord also overflows to others, because when the joy of the Lord is in us, we want others to share in that joy too. We can't just keep it to ourselves or be selfish about it. Right? Now, sometimes we are tempted to seek pleasure in ungodly ways. Right? Just indulging ourselves excessively, just following our impulses, but that always ends up being empty and self-centered. Sometimes it's an attempt to escape from reality, but when that pleasure wears off, we're left feeling even more empty and desperate and anxious. But God's joy is a greater and deeper and more lasting joy. Psalm 4 verse 7 says, you have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. It's not bad to rejoice in the good things that God has created, but God's joy goes far deeper. You know, Christian rejoicing is not a superficial thing.

Some people think that Christian rejoicing means putting a fake smile on your face when you're feeling all broken up inside. That is not true. Again, as we'll see next week, there's a time to express sorrow and weeping, and there's plenty of psalms that can help you do that and affirm that.

[24 : 04] Christian rejoicing has seriousness and depth to it because it's rooted in the character of God. God takes delight in us as His people. And through His Spirit, God pours His own joy into our hearts.

It's not primarily based on our circumstances. It's a joy that comes from trusting and hoping in the character and goodness and faithfulness of God. And you know, what we'll see next week is that when Christians weep and repent and lament, it's not the same thing as self-loathing or despair. Sometimes we're afraid to honestly face the depths of our sin because we believe that doing so will only ever lead us where it has always led us to a place of overwhelming shame and self-condemnation and simply defeat. But Christian repenting and sorrowing over our sin always has what I would call a hopeful horizon because we believe in a God who restores what is broken and who rebuilds what is ruined. And so we can face the depths of our sin not because it will lead us to despair, but because it leads us to the God who restores and rebuilds and gives hope. We'll see more on that next week. But here, verse 12, the conclusion of this first section, all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them. Do you see how understanding the Word of God produced joy?

And today we have reason to rejoice. Amen? All right, so that's the first point, understanding the Word of God produces joy. The second point will be a little shorter, obeying God's Word produces joy. Verse 13, next day, some of the heads of fathers' houses, priests, and Levites come to Ezra to study the words of the law. Now, you see, it was important for everyone in the community, men, women, and children alike, to hear and understand the Word of God. But here we see some of the leaders of the community taking initiative to dig deeper so that they in turn would be equipped to lead and teach others. Now, the priests and Levites were responsible for teaching God's people when they gathered together, sort of like pastors and elders are today.

And the heads of fathers' houses had the responsibility of leading their families spiritually and teaching them at home. And we see them taking that responsibility seriously. They don't just attend the regular gatherings along with everybody else and then go home. They go one step further. They go to Ezra and say, teach us more. We want to study so that we can teach and bless and help the people who are entrusted to our care. Now, if you are a Christian and if you are a husband or father, God has given you the responsibility of spiritually leading and caring for your family. Are you taking that responsibility seriously to pray with your wife and with your kids and to speak God's blessing over them, to remind them of the truth of who they really are as image bearers of God? And if they trust in Jesus as people who belong to Jesus? Do you read the Word of God in your home? Talk about it with your family.

[27 : 53] They see that your family life is shaped by it. Now, there are different ways to do this, but none of them happen automatically. You know, you will not become a godly and wise husband or father just by coming to church each Sunday and doing nothing else. You need to go one step further like these men did, to dig deeper into the Word of God so that you can have something to share with the rest of your family that will help each of them become all that God wants them to be. If you don't know where to start, come and talk to one of the elders or find a godly man that you trust and say, teach me. I'm trying to figure this out and I don't know where to start.

And of course, this applies to all of us in the other people that God has entrusted to us. Maybe you're a Bible study leader. Maybe you're a mom. Maybe you're a mentor to younger Christians, right? There's all kinds of ways that God has given us responsibilities and opportunities to build up and encourage others in the body of Christ. And if you're in that place, be encouraged to take the steps you need to learn more. So, leaders come to Ezra. They dig into the Word together. Then they notice something. They have an insight. Verse 14, they notice, the Lord had commanded by Moses that the Feast of Booths in the seventh month should be a nationwide camping trip. They should all live in temporary shelters, what they call booths. Now, when I hear booth, I think friendlies. Not quite right. Think tent with not quite all, maybe not with a very solid roof. But think like walls and somewhat exposed to the outdoors. Okay? And the point was, they were supposed to live in these temporary shelters because the Feast of Booths was a reminder of the journey that their people had made centuries ago through the wilderness and how God had provided for them when they lived in tents in the wilderness. Temporary shelters that they could pick up and bring to the next place whenever they had to move. And the feast was a reminder that God had brought them through that hard time and that He had provided for them every day. [30 : 16] So, they had celebrated this festival before. Zerubbabel celebrated it in Ezra 3, but they had neglected this part of it. And so, they go out to the people and they say, we got to gather some branches and build these shelters and enjoy a camp out. Now, I have to say, if I was a kid back then, I would have been like, this is cool. Right? We get to camp out for a week. But camping out and feasting together was a way of reenacting and reliving the story of God's faithfulness through a time in the past.

And it was a prayer that God would continue to provide and be present with them as He had way back then. So, verse 16 through 18 show us their response to this insight, and their response is immediate, prompt obedience. They say, let's do it. Let's build the booths. They celebrate the feast. So, when we look at this chapter as a whole, we see a whole person, well-rounded response to the Word of God. We see understanding, people understanding God's Word with their minds as it's explained and read and taught. We see people responding emotionally to God's Word. First, they weep, and then they rejoice. And finally, we see the people obeying, putting into practice what they've learned. And we need all three of these, understanding that leads to emotion and that leads to obedience. Now, churches tend to specialize for whatever reason. Sometimes churches tend to be imbalanced, right? Some churches emphasize the understanding part. So, there's lots of teaching and explanation and understanding. But if you start weeping, or you start jumping up and down, or visibly rejoicing, or raising your hands, then people look at you and think you're a little weird.

Maybe you've been there. Other churches are on the other end, full of emotion, jumping and dancing and laughing and all kinds of things, but you sort of wonder, like, what are they rejoicing about?

Do people even know what they're rejoicing about? And as James reminds us, we can hear the Word and understand it. We can even respond emotionally to it.

[32 : 32] But if we don't obey, we're just like somebody who looks at ourselves in the mirror and sees we're having a bad hair day and doesn't comb our hair. You see something, and you don't do a thing about it.

It's called stupid. We've all been there. But this is a well-rounded response.

Understanding, emotion, obedience. Or as Chris Wright puts it, reading and listening, explaining and teaching, weeping and rejoicing, finding and doing. And if you look at verse 17, end of this section, it says not just that there was great rejoicing, like there was in verse 12, but there was very great rejoicing.

Because the people not only understood God's Word, they were obeying it. And Jesus said, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it.

And that word blessed, it means more than happy, but it's not a bad, it sort of does mean happy in a sense, right? Happy are those who hear the Word of God and obey it.

[33 : 44] There's a joy that comes from obeying the Word of God. Now, for some of you, you might be listening to this whole sermon, and you might think, obedience produces joy.

What? Like, that doesn't make any sense. Right? For many people today, obedience or submission to God is at best a necessary duty, and at worst, it's oppressive restriction.

How can obeying someone else's commands promote my own happiness? But do you see who it is that is giving these commands?

From the very beginning, the Bible tells us that the God who commands us is the God who created us. In other words, he's the architect who drew the plans. And so, he knows how the building should go up.

He's the potter who's molding the clay, and he has an idea in his mind of the beauty that he is fashioning out of each one of us. He's the author of the story.

[34 : 52] He can see beyond the present. The maker's laws are always for his creature's good. But, you know, when we go ahead to the New Testament, the New Testament shows us something even more moving and even more powerful.

Because the New Testament shows us that the same God who spoke with authority and who commands us to obey and who is limited by nothing outside himself, chose to become a limited human being.

You see, the Son of God, who had authority over everything, put himself in a position where he was required to obey every single one of the laws that were binding upon his people.

Jesus obeyed God even when it cost him his reputation and his comfort and ultimately his life. You see, when Jesus died on the cross, he willingly took the punishment that disobedient rebels deserved in order to open up a way for us to come back to God so that everyone who believes in him would become, would be made new.

And so when Jesus calls us to obey, and it's Jesus who's speaking to us through all of the scriptures, when Jesus summons us to obey, he's not asking us to do anything that he hasn't already done himself.

[36 : 20] And he promises that just as his death led to resurrection and victory, that every death we die in union with him, every death to our own impulses, our own desires, our own hopes and dreams that sometimes get shattered on the rocks, that every death that we entrust to his hands will lead to a resurrection.

You see, it's his voice that calls us to obey, and it's his voice that promises us very great joy as we understand and obey his word.

Let's pray. Oh God, we thank you for speaking to us through your word. And we thank you that you made us and you designed us to find our greatest joy in knowing you and living in line with who you've made us to be.

Lord, forgive us for thinking that you don't want our joy. Forgive us for thinking that you are an obstacle to our joy.

Forgive us for thinking that we know better. Oh God, would you pour out your joy into our hearts by your Holy Spirit that sustains, would you sustain us and energize us and fill us in a fresh way?

[37 : 49] Amen. We thank you for Jesus. We pray these things in his name. Amen.