

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2? If you're looking in one of the few Bibles, it's found on page 986. We're looking today at 1 Thessalonians 2, beginning at verse 17 through chapter 3, verse 10.

If you were here last week, Pastor Matt preached on the same passage. But this is not a mistake. As we study this passage, preparing for this series, we found two major themes that run through this section.

So last week, Pastor Matt talked about the character of gospel ministry. And today, we'll consider the theme of suffering or affliction. And so let me read this passage, 1 Thessalonians 2, beginning at verse 17.

And Paul says this. Because we wanted to come to you, I, Paul, again and again.

But Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before the Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

[1 : 14] Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone. And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith that no one be moved by these afflictions.

For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you.

For this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction, we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live if you are standing firm in the Lord.

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you? For all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.

[2 : 36] Let's pray. Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain and entered not into glory before he was crucified, mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it to be none other than the way of life and peace.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. One of the realities that every religion, every philosophy, every worldview must grapple with is the reality of human suffering.

There are, of course, the age-old questions. Why do we suffer? How did suffering enter the world? Is the reality of suffering consistent with belief in a good and wise creator?

But there's also the practical questions. How do we deal with the suffering that we actually experience? Do we see suffering primarily as an evil to avoid?

Or is it also a path to wisdom that should sometimes be embraced? How does faith or unbelief shape our understanding of suffering and our response to it?

[3 : 52] Well, the passage we're looking at this morning shows us a distinctly Christian approach to suffering. It doesn't answer every question about suffering. It's less focused on the why questions, why does suffering happen, but more focused on the practical question of how are we as Christians to face suffering?

So if you are a Christian, I hope that this sermon will shape how you face your own suffering and the suffering of others. If you are not a Christian, I hope that you will consider how you deal with the reality of suffering and what the Christian faith, what difference the Christian faith might make to your approach to suffering.

Now, in this passage, Paul shows us three aspects of a Christian approach to suffering. First, he shows us the inevitability of suffering. Second, he shows us the danger that comes with suffering. And third, he points us to the comfort that we need to stand firm in suffering. So first, the inevitability of suffering. Chapter 3, verse 3, Paul says, Don't be moved by these afflictions, for you know that we are destined for this.

He says, When we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were going to suffer. And it's happened just like we said. Now, in one sense, you might read this and say, Well, the inevitability of suffering, that seems rather obvious.

[5 : 20] We live in a fallen world and we all suffer. No matter how hard we try to avoid it, we will encounter physical, emotional, social, and spiritual afflictions throughout our life on earth.

It's part of the human condition. And that's true. But Paul's not primarily talking just in a very general way about all kinds of suffering that all kinds of people experience.

He's talking specifically about the afflictions that he and the Thessalonian Christians experienced because they were Christians. Because they were committed to following Jesus above everything else.

So they had, he, Paul and the Thessalonian Christians had endured physical beatings, financial penalties, opposition and threats, social exclusion, forced separation from one another.

All for the sake of their loyalty to Jesus. We looked at Acts 17, which tells about when Paul came to Thessalonica. But just to recap, he began preaching about Jesus.

[6 : 21] The religious leaders got jealous. And so they hired a mob and started a riot. Then they arrested some of the new Christian believers and made them post bond as a guarantee that Paul and Silas wouldn't cause any more trouble.

As a result, Paul and Silas had to leave rather abruptly in the middle of the night. Then Paul and Silas went 50 miles down the road to the next major city and started again preaching the message about Jesus.

And some of the religious leaders in Thessalonica followed them and chased them down all the way to Berea, the next city, and started causing all kinds of trouble for them there. And so then Paul had to get on a boat and go all the way down to Athens, a couple hundred miles away.

But meanwhile, after Paul and Silas left, the Thessalonian Christians were in a tense situation. And Paul refers to this. If you look at chapter 1, verse 6, and chapter 2, verse 14, he says, You received the word in much affliction.

And then in verse 14 of chapter 2, he says, You became imitators of the churches of God in Judea. You suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jewish leaders in Judea.

[7 : 29] Now, we don't know exactly what happened in Thessalonica in the six months or so between the time that Paul left and when he wrote them this letter, but it certainly wasn't easy.

They had a tense relationship with the political authorities, and they had some enemies who would use every chance they could get to undermine them, to attack them, and to cause trouble for them. And of course, when you're living under those kind of external pressures, day by day, you experience internal afflictions as well. Anxiety, discouragement, fear, stress, feeling overwhelmed and alone, even despair.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7, 5, he says, When we came into Macedonia, that's the region where Thessalonica was located, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without fears within.

Now, we may not face the same kind of physical threats of persecution as the Thessalonians did, but have we experienced external challenges and internal afflictions, fightings without fears within.

[8 : 44] What Paul said to them, and he says to us, he says, None of this should be a surprise to you. He says, We already told you it was going to happen. We're destined for this.

Now, that word destined is a strong word. But it's translated elsewhere in the New Testament, appointed. So, if Paul uses the same word in Philipians 1, verse 16, he says, I am appointed to defend the gospel.

In other words, God has appointed me to defend the gospel. Or in Luke chapter 2, 34, Simeon prophesied, he said, This child, referring to Jesus, is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel.

Paul is saying, God has appointed us, the Thessalonians, and us, those who follow Jesus, his dearly loved and chosen people, to suffer affliction for the sake of following Jesus.

John Calvin said, This is our condition, which the Lord has laid upon us. These are the terms on which we are Christians. Now, in the broader context of the New Testament, this is not an unusual teaching.

[9 : 57] It's not an isolated teaching. Paul said in Acts 14, 22, to the church in Antioch, he said, Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. Or Philippians 1, 29, he says, It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake.

Later in his life, 2 Timothy 3, 12, Of course, Paul was only reflecting the teaching of Jesus himself. Mark 8, 34, and 35, Jesus said, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it. So if you're here today, if you're not a follower of Jesus, let me say to you right up front, there is a cost to following Jesus.

Jesus does not promise an easy life. Following him will require suffering, sacrifice, and self-denial. Now, some of the popular TV and radio preachers don't tell you that.

[11 : 13] They say if you believe in Jesus, he'll give you your best life now. And every day will be a Friday. You just need to claim your blessing and keep praying for it, and God will make it happen.

Turn to Jesus, and your life will start to go smoothly. But it's not always true. And it's better to realize it sooner than later. Now, if you've come in here for a while, you probably know better.

Right? We know that suffering is part of the package of being a Christian. But I think most of us still believe that most of the time, our life, we should be generally happy.

Or at least most of the time, we should be free from great troubles. We see suffering as an abnormal interruption, an intrusion into the meaningful course of our life.

And if we're honest, many of us don't believe what Paul says in verse 3, that we are destined, we are appointed by God to suffer. And so when we do suffer, when we do face affliction, we can be easily shaken and unsettled.

[12 : 23] We can be easily moved. Even though Paul says don't be moved. One writer said, Paul's not thinking that a period of persecution will pass, and then the church will return to normal life.

Normal life is persecution. Strong statement. I think it's true. Now, most of us here don't face the threat of physical persecution.

As the Thessalonians did, I hope that you won't have to postpone for your pastor to guarantee that he won't cause any more trouble in town. And that's all right.

There's no need to intentionally seek out persecution. In the early centuries of the church, there were many Christians in the Roman Empire who were martyred, who were killed for their faith, because they wouldn't abandon their commitment to Jesus.

And they refused to bow down and worship the emperor. But there were also some zealous young Christians who admired the martyrs so much that they wanted to be one.

[13 : 27] And so they'd go to the local police station and say, I'm a Christian. Now you can kill me. And so the pastors had to say, no, that's not the Christian way.

The Christian way is not to seek out suffering or persecution for its own sake, not to sensationalize it, but simply to follow Jesus and accept it if and when it comes.

On the other hand, if you look at your life and you're not suffering at all for the sake of following Jesus, then you should ask yourself, am I truly following Jesus?

Or am I just kidding myself? Because if we're truly following Jesus in the middle of a world that doesn't, then our priorities, our values, our decisions, our ethical frameworks should sometimes seem strange or at least different to the people around us.

We should feel a tension of living in this world but not belonging to it. And sometimes for that reason, being excluded or misunderstood or marginalized.

[14 : 39] Paul says, for those who follow Jesus, suffering is inevitable. God has appointed it for us. So that's the first point. Suffering is inevitable for Christians.

But Paul's second point is that suffering is not only inevitable, but it can be dangerous. In particular, the spiritual danger that comes with suffering is the temptation to stop trusting in Jesus and turn to something else instead.

And that's particularly what Paul was worried about in the case of the Thessalonian Christians. They were new Christian believers. Paul had been with them only a short time. And then he was abruptly cut off from them. No contact at all. And they were surrounded by opposition. And so he was worried that they would cave into the pressure. That they would lose heart and give up.

And this is a very real danger for all of us when we face suffering. Suffering can drive us to our knees in humble dependence upon God.

[15 : 44] Or suffering can tempt us to distance ourselves from God. We might start thinking, well, if there really is an all-powerful God who loves us, why would he knowingly make our lives so difficult?

Isn't it God's job to make our lives happier? And healthier? And smoother? And better? I turned to God so that he would help me.

Not so he would make my life harder. If this is what it means to be a Christian, is it really worth it anyway? Maybe I should just go back to my old life. And then we begin to drift away from God.

We stop praying. We stop coming to church. We stop associating with other Christians who remind us of these things. Because in our heart, we're either mad at God or simply cold and indifferent toward him.

And when we don't turn to God for comfort, inevitably we turn to something else for comfort instead. So we latch on to other things. Our work. Or food.

[16 : 52] Or chocolate. Or shopping. Or alcohol. Or a new dog. Or watching TV. Or surfing the web. Or all kinds of other things.

We latch on to them. And see comfort in them. And they become the source of our happiness. Or at least a temporary escape from the pain.

You see, when we don't believe that suffering is part of what it means to follow Jesus, we easily fall into this danger to stop trusting Jesus and turn to something else instead.

And Paul says, this danger ultimately comes from none other than Satan himself. Chapter 3, verse 5, he says, I sent to learn about your faith.

For fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you. And our labor would be in vain. And even more strikingly, chapter 2, verse 18, Paul says, We wanted to come to you.

[17 : 52] Again and again. But Satan hindered us. Now, to many of us, we read those words and they sound rather odd. Most of us, even if you're a regular part of this church, most of us talk about Satan rarely, if at all.

Let alone attribute specific activities to him. Several years ago, I was at a restaurant with several people from this church. And I was talking with someone who I didn't know well.

I sort of assumed that she went to this church, but that might or might not be true. She was a grad student, I think, in psychiatry or social work. And for some reason, I don't know why I asked this question, but I asked her.

I said, have you ever had any experiences where you wondered if, alongside the reality of mental illness, there was some kind of spiritual or demonic oppression going on in someone's life?

And she looked at me as if I had asked her, have you ever encountered an alien from outer space? She said, no, certainly not. And the whole conversation continued on a different topic awkwardly.

[18 : 56] But the whole idea sounded completely implausible. And I think to most people in our society today, it does sound completely implausible. Now, of course, some people go to the other extreme.

Right? You can go to some churches and everybody's talking about Satan and demons and blaming everything on Satan and demons. And that's not right either. C.S. Lewis wrote, Now, how does Paul describe Satan here?

And how does Paul discern his activity? Let's look deeper into that. Well, in the New Testament, Paul and other writers describe Satan using various terms. The enemy of God's people.

The adversary or accuser of believers. That's actually what the Hebrew word Satan means, accuser or adversary. The tempter, as he does here, who leads people astray.

The father of lies. The one who snatches away God's word from people's hearts. The one who comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Satan is compared to a serpent.

[20 : 21] He's pictured as the ancient serpent who lured Adam and Eve into the deadly trap of sin and rebellion against God. Or a roaring lion prowling around and seeking to devour us.

Satan's goal is to hinder the advance of the liberating good news of Jesus Christ in the world. And Paul is concerned that Satan was seeking to do just that.

To hinder the advance of the gospel of Jesus. In the hearts of these believers and in their community. And in part, he was doing that by preventing Paul and Silas from returning to encourage and teach and exhort them.

As Paul says in 2.18, Satan hindered us. The word could be translated, he blocked us. He cut us off. The word was also used to describe a runner in a race who would cut in in front of another runner.

And throw him off course. It was also a military term. When soldiers would destroy a road. Or in modern times, they'd blow up a bridge. To frustrate their opponent's ability to maneuver.

[21 : 28] However, you might ask, how exactly did Satan hinder Paul? Well, probably not by appearing to him in some kind of physical form. It wasn't necessarily an out-of-body experience or something like that.

But it's probably the simple fact that when Paul left Thessalonica, they had to post bond for him. And for him to return, he would have had to put the Christians in danger.

So he was in this bind, and he sees that behind this difficult political situation is the work of Satan, who wanted to frustrate and hinder the advance of the gospel of Jesus.

Now, it's important to note that Paul does not always attribute every action of government or every affliction or every delay in travel plans to the devil. Well, Acts 16, if you look at Acts 16, verse 6 and 7, describes a time when Paul was hindered in his travel plans.

But there, Paul says, the Holy Spirit hindered us. He says, it says, Paul and his companions went through Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in the Roman province of Asia.

[22 : 39] Then they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. And in Romans, Romans 1.13 and 15.22, Paul says, I've often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented.

And he never mentioned Satan at all in connection with that. So Paul's not seeing a demon under every rock. Paul's not just blaming everything on Satan. You might say, well, how does Paul discern this?

Why does he say in one case, the Holy Spirit hindered us, and in the other case, Satan hindered us? Well, in Acts, the Holy Spirit hindered them from going in one direction and then in another direction, but he soon prompted them and led them to go somewhere else instead.

What happens next is they see a man from Macedonia, the region where Thessalonica was, saying, come over and help us. And they conclude, God has called us to preach the gospel to them.

And so we might say, if the Holy Spirit hadn't hindered them from staying around in Asia and going into Bithynia, they might never have come to Thessalonica and preached the gospel there.

[23 : 45] We might never even be reading this letter. So Paul can look back and see God's providential hand even in those hindrances. And perhaps even in the moment, God made it clear to them that it was the Holy Spirit directly hindering them for his own good purposes.

And in Romans, a similar reason, Paul explains the main reason he hadn't got to Rome yet, is because he had been in all kinds of places where there weren't any Christians at all.

And he was preaching the good news of Jesus and beginning churches in places where no one else had yet laid a foundation. So it wasn't Satan hindering him from coming to Rome. It was God providentially directing him.

Now, of course, even Satan's hindering Paul was not outside of God's ultimate control. Right? Even, we can even see this here.

Even when Paul says again and again, Satan hindered us. What did Paul do? He kept on praying. Verse 9 and 10, he kept on praying night and day for them.

[24 : 51] And God preserved them as we see. And God made a way for Timothy to visit and encourage them even when Paul was unable to. So God made a way for his plan to go forward despite Satan's hindrance.

Now, what should we take from this? Well, brothers and sisters in Christ, we do have an enemy of our souls. He is active in this world, seeking to hinder the advance of the gospel of Jesus.

Seeking to turn us away from God in the midst of our afflictions. And Paul says we should not be unaware of his schemes. And so we should pray, as Paul did, earnestly, night and day.

We should pray especially for new Christian believers, like the Thessalonian Christians, people who are just beginning to follow Jesus. We should pray for Christians who are, for whatever reason, hindered from meeting regularly and being encouraged and exhorted by other believers.

That Satan's temptations and distractions would not prevail in their lives. And we should treasure the opportunities that we have to gather together and encourage one another.

[26 : 05] And see each other face to face, as Paul longed to do. We should treasure the opportunity we have to gather every week and encourage one another. And to meet together in smaller groups.

And to have one-on-one contact during the week. And to exhort and encourage one another. To stand firm in whatever afflictions we may be facing. So that the spiritual dangers that come with suffering would not overtake us.

So we've seen the inevitability of suffering. The danger that comes with suffering. And finally, Paul points us to the comfort that we need. To stand firm in suffering.

Chapter 3, verse 8. Paul says, Now you are standing fast in the Lord. How did Paul and the Thessalonians stand fast?

And how can we stand fast? And the answer is by standing in the Lord. We can stand fast because in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have a companion in suffering.

[27 : 14] You know, one of the hardest things about suffering is when you feel all alone. And the feeling of being all alone can be worse than all the physical pain that comes with it.

You feel like no one can help you. No one can understand what you're going through. And no one will be there for you. And those feelings can be very strong.

Now they're almost always a distortion of reality. Because you're not the only one on earth who has ever suffered. There are other people who have suffered probably in very similar ways.

And even if someone else hasn't been through the exact same experience, they may be able to help you. Or at least to be there with you. And walk with you.

But there was one person who did suffer completely alone. And he suffered the greatest agony that any human being has ever experienced.

[28 : 19] No one understood what this man was going through. None of his closest friends stayed with him through it all. And no one could help him.

Not even one bit. To bear the affliction that he alone was appointed to bear. We read earlier from the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus said to his disciples, You will all fall away. And I will be struck down. And of course Peter said, Even though all fall away, I won't.

Jesus said, Yes, you will. Even tonight. You'll deny me. Three times. Peter said, I won't deny you. Even if I have to die with you.

And then Jesus went off to pray. To prepare for the affliction that he would face. And he said to his disciples, Watch and pray. So that you won't fall into temptation.

[29 : 25] And he went off and prayed. And he said, Father, Father, take this cup away from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done. When he came back, Peter and the rest of the guys were already asleep.

He went off and prayed again. Came back an hour later. Sleep again. This was only the beginning. Of a long, dark night.

Over the next two weeks, As we lead up to Good Friday, I hope that you'll spend some time meditating on what Jesus went through.

On the road that he traveled that led to the cross. And I want you to see that it's a road that he traveled alone. The disciples were physically present with him for some of the time.

But spiritually, mentally, they were on another planet. They had no idea what Jesus was going through. They had no idea what he was preparing for. They could not help or comfort him one bit.

[30 : 26] He was comforting them, not vice versa. And at one point, they all left him and fled. Jesus prayed in the garden alone.

He stood before Pontius Pilate alone. And he hung on the cross alone. Because he alone, the sinless one, could bear the weight of our sin.

The world's sin. No one else could share that burden. He alone could drink the cup of God's wrath. God's righteous anger and judgment against the sin of his people. But Jesus suffered alone.

So that you and I would never suffer alone. Jesus was appointed for, and he willingly endured, a far greater suffering than any of us.

[31 : 29] Our appointed for. And when you see the magnitude of what Jesus did on the cross, we can never say that God is unjust or unloving in appointing us to suffer, because our sufferings pale in comparison to his.

And if God's glory was displayed even in Jesus' sufferings, God's glory can be displayed even in ours, as he humbles us and purifies us and shapes us to become more like his own dear son, Jesus.

As one writer said, do not recoil from afflictions. They are among God's most favored gifts. Jesus faced a greater affliction than we will ever face, and he faced a greater danger, a greater temptation than we will ever face, and he stood fast.

And in him we too can stand fast when we face spiritual dangers, because Jesus knows what it's like, and he is our companion in suffering. And so we are not alone.

And we can remind each other that he's also provided one another, so that we can remind each other that we're not alone in suffering. So we can stand fast, because in Jesus we have a companion in suffering, but not only that, we can stand fast, because in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are destined for ultimate glory.

[33 : 00] We're destined to suffer with Christ, but we're also destined for eternal glory with him. And this is the hope of the resurrection. This is what we will celebrate on Easter, that Christ was raised from the dead, and we shall be too.

Christ's suffering was not in vain, and your suffering in him will not be in vain either. One day if we trust in Jesus, our aching and sickly and dying bodies will be redeemed.

And our souls, which have been darkened and corrupted by sin, will be fully cleansed and restored, and we will shine in the presence of the glory of God forever. And that's why Paul concludes 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 23, with such a confident word of blessing.

He says, May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

He will surely do it. We said earlier that we should not be unaware of Satan's schemes, to distract us, to divide us, to deceive us, but we don't have to live in fear of them either.

[34 : 23] Because Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection, dealt a death blow to Satan. Yes, Satan is still alive and doing a destructive work in the world.

But just as God made a way through Satan's hindrances for Paul and the Thessalonian believers, God will make a way for us to stand fast in him, despite whatever dangers you may face.

And one day when Jesus returns, Satan and all his followers will be utterly banished from God's new world. And Jesus will reign forever and ever.

And so in the meantime, we can stand fast. We can sing in the words of an old hymn, This is my Father's world. Oh, let me never forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

This is my Father's world. The battle is not done. Jesus who died shall be satisfied and earth and heaven be won. This is the glory for which we are destined in Christ.

[35 : 31] And because of this future glory, we can stand fast in the midst of present afflictions and in the face of potential future afflictions. Let me close with a story from a man who suffered much for the sake of Jesus.

He's a Romanian pastor named Joseph Son who lived through the communist era and was a pastor in that era. He was arrested in the 70s by the communist authorities.

They were threatening to kill him. And he said to them, Sir, he said to his interrogator, Sir, let me explain how I see this issue. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.

If you kill me, everyone will know that I died for my preaching, for my proclamation of Jesus. And my sermons will speak ten times louder than before.

I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me. Later the officer said, We know that Mr. Son would love to be a martyr, but we are not that foolish to fulfill his wish.

[36 : 42] And when he heard about this, he said, For many years, I had been afraid of dying. And so I had kept a low profile. Because I wanted badly to live, I had wasted my life in inactivity.

But now that I had decided I was ready to die for the gospel, they would not kill me. I could go wherever I wanted and preach whatever I wanted, knowing I was safe.

As long as I tried to save my life, I was losing it. Now that I was willing to lose it, I found it. When we know the comfort of Jesus, our brother and our companion in suffering, and when we see the glory for which we are appointed in him and promised in him, we are free to live for him, no matter what the cost.

So may we stand fast in suffering through our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray. Father, we thank you for sending your own dear son.

And we thank you, Jesus, for willingly accepting that call to bear our sins, the burden which we could not bear, the affliction which would utterly crush us.

[38 : 31] We thank you that you stood in our place so that we might be forgiven, justified, made right with you.

We thank you that you rose again to prove that your death was enough and that death could not defeat you. And Lord, that in you we know that even death cannot defeat us.

so we pray that you would teach us to stand fast in suffering, to trust that even that you have appointed us to suffer, that you have done so in your love and mercy to us and in your wisdom.

And we thank you for the comfort that we have in our Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray that we would reflect him, that you would be shaping us so that we would reflect his character in whatever you may call us to face.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.