

"Who Was, And Is, And Is to Come"

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[0 : 00] So, as Matt mentioned last week, we are starting a series in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. And Revelation is a bit of a notorious book. It's notorious for its striking imagery. It's notorious for being in some places hard to interpret. It's notorious for, at times, raising theological controversy. But today, what we want to do is look at the opening of the book and just listen to how Revelation presents itself to us. And I hope what you'll see as we begin, and as we continue through this book over the coming weeks and months, is that Revelation is actually a comforting book. And yes, it's a bracing book, but ultimately it's a worshipful and life-giving book. So, let's turn to Revelation chapter 1. That's page 965 in the Pew Bible. And I'll read verses 1 through 8. You'll see that the first three verses are a prologue of sorts, and then verse 4 is where the book proper begins. And we see that Revelation is actually a letter like so much of the New Testament. So, let me read for us. Revelation chapter 1, verses 1 through 8.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. And blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so, amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. Let's pray together. Father, we are grateful for your word and for this book of Revelation. Help us now as we seek to understand this book and to approach it. Help us by your spirit to hear what you are saying to us, your church. For Jesus' sake, amen.

Amen. Well, what I want to do this morning is walk through the first eight verses of Revelation and give a bit of an overview, or at least an orientation to this great book that we call Revelation.

And I want to make five points or five observations from what we see here that will help us launch out on our study. So, with that being said, let's just dive in. The first observation is this.

The book of Revelation is from God. The book of Revelation is from God. This is how the whole book begins, telling us where it came from, its source. Look again at verse one, the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him. That is, God the Father gave this message to his son, Jesus, to then pass on to his people. In particular, we're told that Jesus sends this message through an angel to John. And John, we learn a little later, is in exile on the island of Patmos, exiled for his faithful witness to the word of God. Now, from the early days of the church, this John here in Revelation was identified as John the Apostle. And even though there are some major stylistic differences between, say, the gospel of John and the book of Revelation, it's hard to imagine who else might be so well-known and so well-respected in the early church to be able to write such a letter, not just to one church, but a whole region of churches. But now, even if we have good reason for believing that John the

[4 : 27] Apostle was the author of this book, and I think we do, we shouldn't miss the point that John himself makes in these opening words. What's most important is that this book is from God.

And not just any God. You know, the late first century when John was writing knew of lots of different gods. And Rome, the empire at the time, was decidedly pluralistic. But look at how John describes this God in verses 4 and 5. This is the God who is, and who was, and who is to come.

Now, that phrase is actually an echo of the divine name from Exodus chapter 3, when Moses encounters the burning bush and God reveals himself as the Lord, Yahweh, I am who I am, or I will be who I will be, the eternal, unchanging, transcendent, sovereign one.

And the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah will hear God reiterate this divine name and reaffirm God's history-spanning transcendence. Earlier in the service, we read from Isaiah chapter 4, verse 6, thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, I am the first and I am the last. Beside me there is no God. The first and the last, he who was and is and is to come. But then surprisingly, in verses 4 and 5, John adds the word, and from this God and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. Now, we naturally ask, who are these seven spirits?

[6 : 17] It's hard to imagine that any mere creature could be placed on par with the one true God in the way John does here, because he says it's from this transcendent God and, well, who could possibly occupy that place with the great transcendent I am? Well, it seems that with this phrase, John's probably referring to the Holy Spirit. Seven here denoting the fullness of the Spirit. Some translations even render this phrase the sevenfold Spirit. And indeed, there may be an Old Testament allusion here. In Zechariah chapter 4, the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, we see that the Spirit is possibly symbolized by the number seven, as the prophet sees seven flames on the seven golden lampstands, and then says, it's not by strength, it's not by might, but by my Spirit. So, what do we make of all this? Well, what we make of this is that the book of Revelation comes from God, but not just any God, the triune God. Father, Spirit, Son, the one Lord. Now, let's just pause for a second and consider that. The book of Revelation is God's word, God's message to us. Indeed, we now know that Revelation is God's last written word that he gave to the church. This is the book God wants us to have as the culminating word, the last word, before Christ returns and we see him face to face. You know, if you had a beloved family member who left you perhaps one last written letter and they wrote it especially for you, out of love and concern and care for you, how would you treat that letter? You would prize it. You would cherish it. The very fact of having that letter would bring you great comfort. And that's true of the book of Revelation. It's from God, and it should bring us great comfort to know that God has given it to us. But if Revelation comforts us being from God, we should also expect that Revelation should challenge us being from God.

If indeed it is from God, then it contains what God wants us to see. Indeed, the very word revelation means an unveiling, a kind of pulling back of the curtain. This is something that only God could make known. It's a divine disclosure. Here is, as it were, the perspective of heaven laid out for us. And if it is indeed that, then it is different from us. It's other than us, and we should expect to be challenged by it. And indeed, we find there are many things in Revelation that will challenge us. Revelation is not for the faint of heart. For those who are happy with complacent, comfortable, cultural Christianity. Revelation is like a splash of cold water. Or even better, Revelation is sort of like a whole sprinkler system going off at once. But wouldn't we rather that than a supposed word from God that merely tells us what we already know? Wouldn't we rather have God's word come to us and challenge us than have merely our own voices telling us what we already know?

If our engagement with God's word doesn't challenge us, is it really God's word? Or just our own word that we're reading? When God's word challenges us, that's perhaps the precise moment when we know that indeed we're dealing with someone other than ourselves. That it's not just our own cultural preferences or predilections kind of staring back at us in the water, but that here we are beholding the face of the eternal God. So the book of Revelation is from God. It is his heavenly divine disclosure about history and eternity, about power and weakness, about empires and martyrs, about witness and true justice.

[10 : 31] Revelation is from God. And therefore, we should expect it to bring both comfort and challenge. But second, what we see here is that the book of Revelation is not just from God, it's for the church. It's for the church. Look again at verse 1, the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him, to show to his servants. God intends this message for every servant of King Jesus, that is every follower of Christ, every church member. This book is meant for you, Christian. In verse 4, we see that John's immediate audience were the seven churches in Asia, that is Roman Asia Minor, which is today the country of Turkey. In chapters 2 and 3, we see that there are specific messages for each of these seven churches from the risen Lord Jesus. But what we also notice, that as this number unfolds, we see that the number seven, as we've already seen, is a very significant number in the book. So why does John write to seven churches? Well, because seven was a number that

symbolized fullness and completion, like the seven days of creation in Genesis. So these seven historic local churches are also, in God's providence, a representation of the whole church. So Revelation wasn't just meant for seven local churches in the first century, but for the universal church of all times and all places as well, which means that Revelation is for you. God the Father gave this message to his son Jesus, and Jesus delivered it to the Apostle John through an angelic messenger so that the whole church, us included, could benefit from it. Revelation is for the church. And that means two things. First, it means that you can read and understand

Revelation. Don't be intimidated by it. It's not just for prophecy aficionados or Bible scholars. Yes, there will be some things in the book that don't make sense at first, but, you know, isn't that true of every book in the Bible? Every book has parts that aren't immediately clear, but you can still read and be edified by this book. I like the story that Vern Poitras tells. He's a New Testament professor, and he tells this story about understanding the book of Revelation. He recounts how a group of seminary students had finished playing basketball in a gym together, and they noticed that in the corner, one of the janitors was sitting reading a book. So the seminary students come up, and on their way by, they say, oh, what are you reading? And the janitor says, I'm reading the Bible. And the seminary students ask, well, what part of the Bible? And he says, Revelation. Ah, well, now the seminarians thought that they could help this poor soul to understand. So they say, well, do you understand what you're reading? And the man says, yes, I do. And the seminarians were astonished. They said, well, what does it mean? And he said, Jesus is going to win. That's what the book of Revelation means.

Jesus wins. You see, friends, you can understand the book of Revelation. In fact, one of the best summaries of the book of Revelation I've ever encountered wasn't in a commentary, though there are some great commentaries on Revelation. It was actually in a kid's show called What's in the Bible by the old VeggieTales creator, Phil Vischer. And in this kid's show, he's able, in just a half an hour of a kid's show entertaining to encapsulate what this great book is all about. Even a child can understand the main themes and the main message of the book of Revelation. So you see, the message of Revelation isn't so complex and intricate that you need years and years of training to understand.

Even a kid's show can capture the beauty, power, and truth of this book. Revelation is for the church. The second thing that that means isn't just that Revelation is readable, but also that it's relevant.

You know, if you jump ahead and read chapters 2 and 3, you'll see that those churches face some of the exact issues that we face today. Things like the danger of spiritual complacency, or the danger of compromise in the face of a dominant culture, or the danger of moral laxity in the midst of a pleasure-centered world, or the worries of persecution and social exclusion for following Christ, or the danger of self-sufficiency bred by material wealth and comfort. You read these seven letters, and it can feel like John has been following us all on Instagram and reading our mail, and it seems like he knows exactly what we need to hear. But then, after you read chapters 2 and 3, you get to chapters 4 and following, and that's where things really start to get interesting in Revelation. But consider this simple literary observation, friends. Chapters 4 through 22 are meant to be relevant to the church's struggles in chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 4 through 22 don't blast off into a completely different book with a completely different audience. No, those visions of chapters 4 through 22 are exactly what those churches need to hear so that they can continue in their faithful witness. In fact, verse 3 of chapter 1 right here in our text says that we are supposed to hear it and keep it. That is, obey it. Not speculate over it, not merely pontificate about it, but hear it and heed it. Why? Because it's relevant to us. Now, that will be part of the joy of our sermon series together. We'll begin to see how those visions in chapter 4 and following, we'll begin to see how those visions are indeed for the church, for us right now, to hear and to keep and to be encouraged and to be challenged by. So that's our first two big observations. Revelation is from God and

[16 : 44] Revelation is for the church. That's who it's from and that's who it's for. Now, we also ask, well, what is it about? And that's our third point. Revelation is about what must soon take place. Again, verse 1, the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. As I mentioned, the outline of Revelation on a broad scale is fairly straightforward. After the introduction in chapter 1, chapters 2 and 3 give the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor. Then in chapter 4, a series of visions begins, and these visions continue all the way to chapter 22, verse 5. Then the end of chapter 22, from verse 6 to the end, is the

conclusion of the book. And the conclusion has very similar language and themes to the introduction here in chapter 1.

Now, when you kind of zero in and you read that big section in the middle with all of the visions, the thing you realize, the first thing you realize is that the climax of that section, those visions, the climax, the high point, the conclusion of it all, is the return of Christ. The defeat of God's enemies, Satan, evil, death, and the consummation of the new creation in the new heavens and new earth. That God's great victory is coming. The king is returning. All of his enemies will be defeated, and creation will be healed and restored. But coming back here to chapter 1, we ask, in what sense is that going to be soon, John says?

The things that are about to take place soon. Was John just mistaken that the return of Christ was going to happen relatively shortly, and he got the timing wrong? Or are we wrong to interpret those final chapters in Revelation as depictions of God's great triumph when Christ returns in glory? Perhaps those are symbols of something else. Well, friends, I don't think John was mistaken about timing. And I do think those final chapters describe the church's great hope of Christ's bodily return. [19:01] In order to understand what John means here in chapter 1 by soon, is to realize that in the Bible, time is talked about in two ways. On the one hand, there's chronological time. You know, that's the kind of passing of hours and days and months and years. And the Greek word for that kind of time was *chronos*. That was clock time. The just passing of days and months and hours and minutes and so on.

But in the New Testament, there's actually a second word for time. There's another Greek word for time. And that word is *kairos*. When a sports team says, this is our time, or when you reminisce with your friends and say, we had the time of our lives, then you're getting a sense maybe a little bit of what the term *kairos* means. It's significant time. It's meaningful time. It's the right time.

And in the God-centered perspective of the Bible, there isn't just clock time. There's *kairos*. There's redemptive historical time. These are the chapters of God's plan and purpose unfolding.

Like when God says, when Jesus says, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. What Jesus means there is that the last great chapter of God's timeline have begun.

So when John says, the things that must soon take place, he doesn't necessarily mean soon chronologically. I think he means soon redemptive historically in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan. This is what's next in God's plan. And it's already beginning to dawn. It's unfolding right before our eyes. John is saying, you live in the last chapter of God's story.

[20:53] It's helpful to compare what John says here in Revelation chapter one to a similar phrase in Daniel two. In Daniel two, God reveals in a vision, a plan for the unfolding of his redemptive purposes.

And in that vision, Daniel foresees a day when God's kingdom will be established after the rise and fall of a number of earthly empires. And Daniel in that moment says that these things, these are the things that must take place in the future. These are the things that will take place in the latter days. For Daniel, the things that must take place were a long way off.

But notice that for John, he picks up that same phrase, the things that must take place. But now the things that must take place are soon. They're impinging, they're imminent.

What was far off for Daniel, living before the death and resurrection of Christ, is now for John soon. Because the church lives after the great saving work of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And because of that, the church now lives in the latter days that Daniel saw.

Remember in 1 John chapter 2, the apostle John tells the church there that it is the last hour. The chapter of God's plan in which we live as the church between the first and second coming of Jesus is the last chapter of God's redemptive plan. These are the last days. And that's why John can say, these things must take place soon. I think baseball is a good analogy here. You know, in the first few innings of a baseball game, no one would say that the end is soon, right? You've got a long way to go in that baseball game. But when you start to reach the eighth and the ninth inning, especially in the ninth inning, the last inning of the game, then you would start to say, yes, the end is soon.

[22:54] But think about it. In baseball, that last inning could actually last a long time, chronologically speaking, especially before the advent of the 15-second pitch clock, right? And yet, even if that ninth inning lasted 30, 40, 50 minutes even, you would still say that in terms of the baseball game, the end is soon. It's near. We're right on the cusp of when everything will come to the conclusion.

And that's, I think, a little bit of what John wants us to sense here. It's the ninth inning of God's great redemptive plan. And there isn't a pitch clock, so it might take some time. But regardless, from the perspective of heaven, from the perspective of what God wants us to have and share, these things will happen soon. In fact, they've already begun to unfold. At any moment, the inning will end, the victors will take the field, and the celebration will begin.

Now, as we think about how to apply this point, the application of this soonness, this nearness of what must take place, we actually find that the application is repeated throughout Revelation. As God or John says things like, stay awake. The Lord will say through John, stay awake. Bear witness.

Don't let the world press you into its mold. The end is near. Stay awake. Bear witness. Don't let the world press you into its mold, even if it means suffering, even if it means losing your life. Bear witness.

[24 : 47] Don't let the world press you into its mold. In fact, from God's perspective, losing your life won't be a defeat because we follow the one who conquered through death and rose again to everlasting life. These things, Christ's return, the defeat of evil, the triumph of God, these things must take place, and they are soon. So Revelation, then, is about the things that must soon take place.

And that leads us to our fourth point. The book of Revelation is from God. It's for the church. It's about the things that must soon take place. And fourth, the book of Revelation communicates these things through symbols. The book of Revelation communicates through symbols. Again, look at verse 1.

It says, Now, admittedly, it's not immediately obvious in our translation here in the English Standard Version, but that verb, he made it known, is actually a verb that literally means he signified it. He signified it. And that's actually how some of the older translations, like the King James Version, actually put it. He signified it by sending his angel to his servant, John. So we get a hint right up front that a lot of revelation is going to come to us in the form of symbolism. Christ signified this thing to the church. Now, in the first couple of centuries leading up to John's day, there were a number of works that utilized heavily symbolic images to convey their meaning. This is what we now sometimes call apocalyptic literature. But in fact, it wasn't just in the couple of centuries leading up to John's day. This is something we see across the Old Testament as well. Portions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and a number of other books contain portions that are heavily symbolic in this symbolic style that we've come to call apocalyptic literature. So for John's audience, it might not have been as strange as it is to us today to receive a book like this. You know, we aren't used to reading this kind of heavily stylized, figurative, symbolic language, but it was a little more common for John and his audience. Now, if you read an introduction to the book of Revelation in a good study Bible, you'll learn that there are a number of ways that Christian readers have made sense of this symbolic language, and some approaches have been more popular at one time or another to sort of guess or to sort of discern what these symbols are pointing to. One approach, for example, would say that all the symbols are referring to an event that was fulfilled in the first century. Another approach sees Revelation as symbolizing the unfolding of church history as the ages go on. Yet another approach would see Revelation as symbolizing primarily events that are yet in the future that have not taken place yet. And then yet another approach would even understand Revelation as expressing kind of timeless spiritual realities. Yes, looking ahead to a future, but also spiritual realities that are true right now in the church age and throughout the church age.

Now, we're not going to spend a ton of time unpacking those different approaches and things like that. If you're interested this week, you can grab an ESV study Bible or borrow one from a friend and check them out for yourself and read them and get a good grasp of what they are and how they approach the text. And, you know, we might ask as we look at these different approaches, we might ask, well, which way is best? Well, the reality is, is that each approach has its strengths and weaknesses.

[28 : 40] And, and most commentators agree. And the approach that we'll take is a blended approach in this book. That sometimes the symbols do refer to things going on in the first century. And sometimes they clearly refer, refer to things that are going to happen in the future, like the bodily return of Christ. But, you know, the most important thing that we'll want to do as we walk through Revelation and consider this symbolism, you know, the best way to really approach the

symbolism of the book of Revelation is to understand it in light of the Old Testament. The book of Revelation probably has more allusions and references to the Old Testament than any other book in the, in the whole Bible, in the New Testament. So it's God's words itself that will open up for us the book of Revelation.

And it's the Old Testament that's going to help us grasp what God wants us to hear and to heed as we study this book. So we'll pay particular attention to how what John is saying is, is precluded and references God's promises and plans laid out in the Old Testament that are now being fulfilled in the New. Now, this symbolic nature of Revelation, I think kind of practically means a couple of things for us. Practically first, when you read Revelation, slow down. And if you don't understand something, be humble, admit that it might be a little hard to understand. The symbolic nature of Revelation reminds us that this is God's word and not ours. And we have to submit ourselves to him and ask for his help to understand it. Secondly, the symbolic nature of Revelation means that God wants your heart. He isn't just interested in barraging your brain with more facts.

God indeed also wants to capture your imagination. He wants to capture your heart. Through this book, God wants to reform how you picture the world and your subsequent hopes and desires. He wants to shape those at a deeper level. You see, because these symbols, they wake us up. They capture our thoughts.

And our thinking and our hearts, they shake us out of our complacency. Some of them are even frightening, you know. Each of us is born into a time and a place and a culture with its own symbols, with its own ways of making sense of the world, with its own deep cultural longings and desires. But Revelation is here to come to us and to retrain and to retrace our thinking, our imagining, our desires, our values. And one of the main things that God is trying to do in Revelation through this deeply symbolic book is that God wants to wake us up to reality, to transcendent reality, to God-centered reality.

[31 : 35] So often our cultural symbols and our times that we live in, it just slowly wants to close us in, to just close the door that the only thing that matters, the only thing that's real is just what's right before us, what we can see. But this book wants to open us up to the transcendent reality of God and God's plans and God's future.

Because in reality, God's reality is the only reality there is. Well, this brings us then to our fifth and our final point.

The heavily symbolic book of Revelation is from God. It's for the church. It's about the things that must soon come to pass. And then fifth, the book of Revelation is for our blessing.

It's purpose is to bless us. Verse three, Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time isn't here. And then in verse four, John immediately speaks of the grace and peace that flow from the triune God to the church.

And as we'll see in chapters two and three, John's readers need this blessing of grace and peace. His original audience needs the grace to persevere in their faith in the midst of trials, especially the pressures to compromise in the midst of persecution.

[33 : 04] And in the midst of these external trials, they need peace, the peace that only the eternal God, who is sovereign over history, can give. And friends, the reality is, is that we need those blessings of grace and peace too.

And that's what Revelation is meant to convey. Blessed are those who hear and keep it. Grace and peace to the church. And this grace and peace comes to us because ultimately, Revelation isn't just from God.

It's about God. God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And Revelation leads us to worship Him.

You know, if our time spent in Revelation as a church leaves us more fascinated by scrolls and trumpets and bowls, if it leaves us more sort of fascinated and curious about those things, then filled with all filled worship of God, then we've missed the forest for the trees.

If we spend more time squabbling about views of the millennium or things like that, rather than being in awe of who God is and who Jesus Christ is, then we've missed the point. Because Revelation is ultimately about God.

[34 : 24] That's why it blesses us. It's about God's unfathomable mercy in the gospel. Look at verse 5. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom priest to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

It's about God's mercy to us. And Revelation is also about God's righteous judgment of the whole world. Look at verse 7. Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierce Him.

All the tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him. Even so, amen. Revelation is also about God's perfect, good, holy, righteous judgment of the world.

And Revelation is also about God's glory. God's glory as the source and goal of our whole existence. Verse 8 says, I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

You know, when the book of Revelation comes to a close at the end, the thing that strikes you the most there, I think isn't actually the triumph of God over sin and death and Satan, although that is a great triumph.

[35 : 36] And the thing that strikes you the most isn't the beautiful picture of the new heavens and new earth and the new Jerusalem with the golden streets and the reunion of saints in heaven and earth or the beautiful picture of that heavenly city.

It's not those things that really leave you the most awe-filled. It's actually God there at the end. God in the midst of the city. God present with His people.

And, you know, the climax of the book, the climax of the whole book is that we humans, we humans who have fallen into terrible and deserved judgment, we humans have been rescued by the lion who in love became a lamb and was slain.

And being redeemed by His blood, everyone who has faith in Him will be brought safely through judgment to have fellowship with God forever. It's striking after 17 rich, symbol-laden chapters that weave together the strands of Old Testament prophecy into a tapestry that brings every bit of biblical revelation to its fitting conclusion.

All of these visions come to this simple and beautiful phrase in chapter 22, verse 5. It says, They will see His face.

[36 : 53] You know, when Moses heard God's voice speaking to him from the burning bush, Moses heard the divine name, I am who I am, but he couldn't actually behold God face to face.

God was hiding Himself, as it were, in the burning bush so that Moses could approach Him but not see Him. And later, when Moses says to God in Exodus, God, show me your glory, again God says, But Moses, you can't see me and live.

So Moses hides, God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, and God passes by, again declaring His name, The Lord, I am who I am, I will be who I will be. We can't see God's face and live.

But wonder of wonders, what for Moses was unattainable, and what for saints ever since has remained out of reach will one day be enjoyed by all God's people in Christ, that they will see His face and live, and they will reign with Him forever and ever.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, we ask that as we begin to set out on this great book of Revelation, You would allow us, God, not just to understand these things, but to have our hearts and our lives deeply shaped, transformed by them.

[38 : 18] Lord, give us a deep hunger to know You and Your glory. Help us to approach this book with humility, and help us to hear what You want us to hear.

And may we experience the blessing, God, of hearing it and keeping it, so that we might live as faithful people in this age that You've called us to. Looking forward to Your great return in glory. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.