

James 1:1-18

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Preachers: Greg Hendrickson, Ian Maddock

[0:00] for the way you speak to us through it. And Lord, I pray that by your grace, that none of us here this evening would merely be listeners of your word and thus deceive ourselves, but that instead that we would do what it says, that we would respond with gratitude and with thanksgiving for what you have done for us in Jesus.

It's in his name that we pray and for his sake. Amen. Friends, please turn with me to the book of James. We're beginning a new series this evening in the book of James. We're reading the first 18 verses tonight.

James chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. James writes this. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations, greetings.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

[1:27] That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position, but the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant. Its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me.

For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

[2:45] So friends, this evening we begin a new series in the book of James, or maybe if I can describe it this way, a new series in the sermon of James.

And the reason I say that, I call it that, is because in many ways that's how James the man comes across as a preacher. That's how his letter comes across. It's more like a sermon than a letter.

And we get a sense of that right from the beginning, don't we? That this letter, it's as much a sermon as it is anything else. It's James preaching to us as much as he is writing to us. The way a gifted preacher would, the way a preacher who loves the people he's speaking to, the way he gives it to us bluntly, the way he gives it to us straight.

Verse 13, When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me, he warns. Or verse 16, Don't be deceived, my dear brothers, he says.

And then there's the way, like a preacher, the way he uses all sorts of illustrations to make his point. Not so much in our passage this week, but certainly in the weeks to come. Just to give one example.

[3:52] The point James makes about the way our tongues, really small parts of our body, the way they have an almost disproportionately large effect for their size. You know, just like the bit in a horse's mouth that can turn the whole animal.

Or like the rudder of a ship that can turn a whole vessel. Or like a small spark that can set a whole forest ablaze. That's what our tongues, our words can be like, he says.

They're really small, but they have a huge impact. The thing is, he didn't have to use this illustration, did he? He could have just said, you know, be careful about the way you speak. Choose your words carefully.

They're important. They have big consequences. He could have just left it at that. It certainly would have got the point across. But being the gifted preacher that he is, he knows it wouldn't have got the point across as well, as effectively.

Gifted preacher that he is, he knows how we're wired. He knows the power of an illustration. That explaining's good, but that explaining and illustrating is even better.

[4:54] So there's James Hart for the people he's writing to. His preacher's heart, his skill when it comes to illustrations. And then there's his fondness for the provocative. Gifted preacher that he is, he knows the power of a jolting statement.

Verse two, consider it pure misery, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Except that's not what he says, is it? It's what we expect him to say, but he doesn't. What does he say instead?

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, is what he actually says. At which point we respond, pure what?

Pure joy? Are you out of your mind? How can that be? As a rhetorical device, it certainly gets our attention. More on this in a moment.

And then there's the way that James structures this letter. Structures this letter sermon. As sermon outlines go, it's an oldie but a goodie. Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them and then tell them what you've told them. In other words, there's a symmetry here to this letter.

[5:59] The conclusion, it reiterates the introduction, which brings us to our passage this evening. James' introduction. And like any sermon worth its salt, what you can't help but notice is that right from the very start, this letter, this sermon, it's a call to action.

The Christian life, it revolves around God's initiative, to be sure, God's unmerited kindness towards us in Christ. God is both the author and the perfecter of our faith. But that being said, right from the start here, what James wants us to take to heart is that the Christian life is by no means a life of passivity.

And so this letter, this letter-come sermon, it begins the same way that it ends. It begins and it ends with a call to action. James' purpose, it isn't merely to inform.

He wants to see us transformed. By God's grace, he wants us to be changed by what we've heard, to act on what we've heard. More than anything else, that's what makes this letter most like a sermon.

Right from the very start, James wants us to embrace the Christian life, living life as someone who has been saved. It's a life of activity, not passivity. The question is, as we begin this series tonight, what does that look like in concrete terms?

[7 : 20] And right from the start, James tells us. The Christian life, living life as a person who has been saved, it's a life lived actively, doing two things.

First, it's a life lived persevering. And then second, it's a life lived praying. No matter what our circumstances, whether we're well off or whether we're poor, that's what living the Christian life, living a redeemed life entails, persevering and praying.

Why these two things we ask? Because, verse 18, the last verse in our passage this evening, as Christians, even though God's given us new birth in spiritual terms, the fact is, we have been born into a struggle.

Now, in one sense, the victory has been won, hasn't it? The outcome has been decided. In his death and resurrection, God's triumphed. Jesus has triumphed over sin and death and the evil one.

The kingdom of God has been inaugurated. And yet, for the time being, until Jesus returns, until he returns to consummate his kingdom, and if we're in Christ, we can all very much attest to this, until he returns, while we wait for him to return, their effects persist.

[8 : 38] Christian, God has claimed you as his own. He's given you his Holy Spirit, put a down payment on you, and yet, even though that's true, even though God has claimed us, it's also true that the evil one, contemplation our old self, the lingering presence of indwelling sin, collectively, they're hell-bent on reclaiming us.

Friends, right from the moment we're born, we're in a fight for survival, which begs the question, as our victorious commander-in-chief, what's God's battle plan for our survival?

That's what James is all about. And what we'll begin to see tonight, what we'll see again and again in the coming weeks is this, that God's battle plan for us is this, that having given us new life spiritually, having caused us to be reborn spiritually, the only way we're going to survive is if we then grow and mature.

How do we do that? Well, as I've mentioned, by God's grace, only if we persevere and only if we pray. That's how we survive, by growing, maturing, being progressively, continually conformed into the image and likeness of Jesus.

Now, the image that comes to mind at this point is something out of the plains of the Serengeti, the image of a gazelle or animal giving birth to a baby. You know, right from the moment the newborn flops onto the ground, he or she's in a struggle for survival.

[10 : 12] Right from the moment this calf or baby is born, it's got to be able to stand up and begin to grow and mature and do it fast. Why? It's very survival.

Depends on it. Friends, likewise as Christians from the moment we are reborn. James is all about how we need to actively grow and mature in our faith.

How do we do that? Well, he tells us the God-given means by which we grow and mature is if we persevere and if we pray, is if we listen to God and do what we hear.

And the thing is, this growth is actually measurable. There are divinely endorsed metrics, if you will, by which we can measure how we're doing, how we can tell if we're growing, how we can tell if we're persevering and praying.

As James unfolds, he actually gives us three ways of telling if we're growing or not. One, if we're controlling our tongues. Two, if we're caring for the needy. And three, if we're growing in personal holiness and godliness.

[11 : 11] And in coming weeks, we'll be walking through each of these in turn. But for the time being tonight, as we begin this series in James, as we look at this introduction this evening, the book of James, James' sermon, at its core, it's a call to action.

God's given us new birth. And now he calls us to grow and mature. He calls us to persevere, but he also calls us to pray. So with all this by way of background, with all this by way of scene setting, let's go ahead and briefly look at this introduction together tonight and see how these themes play out.

But before we do, it's really worth asking the question, who is this James anyway? And who's he writing to? Friends, take a look with me at verse 1. James writes, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

Greetings. So first up, who is this James? And historically, the answer's always been James, the brother of Jesus, the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

That's been the historic consensus. It's possible, in theory, that it might have been another James, perhaps. Maybe the James, son of Zebedee. Maybe James, the son of Alphaeus.

[12:24] They're the only other James that pop up in the New Testament. But as I say, the traditional view is that it's Jesus' brother who's writing this. Who else but Jesus' brother, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, someone as well known as him, who else could get away with introducing himself just as James with no other qualifying remarks and expect us to know who it is.

Which, if that's the case, and there's really no reason to expect otherwise, reason to think otherwise, if this really is James, the son of Mary and Joseph, James, the brother of Jesus, who's writing to us, it certainly makes the way he describes his relationship with Jesus all the more poignant.

Even as we read these first 18 verses, did you notice just how often James refers to the people he's writing to, fellow Christians, as brothers? Verse 2, consider it pure joy.

My brothers, he says, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Verse 9, the brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. Verse 16, don't be deceived.

My dear brothers, he writes. All throughout this letter, it's brother this, dear brothers that. James is calling people brother left, right and center. And yet when it comes to Jesus, when it comes to his actual brother in the flesh, what does he call him?

[13:54] How does he refer to Jesus? Well, not as his brother. I mean, he is his brother, but he doesn't refer to him as that. Instead, verse 1, he describes himself as being a servant of God and not of my brother, Jesus Christ.

but of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Humanly speaking, he's his brother and yet he's got no hesitation in calling him Lord. More than that, in fact. The way James constructs this sentence, there's grammatical flexibility, quite possibly intentional grammatical flexibility.

We've seen the way that the NIV puts it, James, a servant of God and of the Lord, Jesus Christ. But the thing is, it could equally be translated, James, a servant of Jesus Christ, who is God, the Lord. Either way, one thing's very much for sure and that's that James has got a breathtakingly high view of his brother.

His view of Jesus is as high as you can get. Forget about sibling rivalry here. Humanly speaking, Jesus might be his brother, but above and beyond all else, he's his Lord.

He's his God, no less. And friends, if we're in Christ this evening, so it is with us. Jesus is our brother. Not in exactly the same way that he was James' brother, perhaps, but he's still very much our brother in the flesh.

[15:20] And in him, we don't have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. But instead, we have one who's been tempted in every way, just as we are. He was without sin, and yet he became sin for us.

He's like us in every way. He's our brother. And yet, mystery of mysteries, he's also our God. So there's general agreement that James is Jesus' brother.

And likewise, when it comes to the second half of verse one, there's general agreement that when he sends his greetings to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, the dispersion, the diaspora, as the leader of the predominantly Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem, there's general agreement that the people he's writing to in particular are Christians who are ethnically Jewish.

Native Judeans who are now living abroad, if you will. That's the typical view. But you know, above and beyond their ethnicity, friends, above and beyond these considerations, he is writing first and foremost to Christians.

And the reasons he's writing to them, the reason this letter's been preserved by God for us as his word to us is that so that we don't forget if we've received God's grace, we might be an elected species, but we're by no means a protected species, if you will.

[16:43] And by that I mean we've been set apart by God to be the undeserving recipients of his kindness. We mightn't be of the world, but God's put us in the world to be his salt and light in the world, to be refined by the world, to refine the world.

In God's kindness we're not of the world, but in his providence we're in the world. And in order to survive in the world as Christians, we've got to grow. And as we've already begun to see, if we want to see that happen, that means a call to action.

It means persevering and praying. First of all, persevering, especially when the going gets tough, which it most certainly will. Take a look at verse 2.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. So remember, James is writing to Christians here. He's writing to people who've already been justified, who are already at peace with God.

[17:53] He's writing to people whose future's full of rejoicing. But their trouble is, their present is anything but. Maybe you can relate to that, friends, that reality is we can all relate to that, can't we?

Their present, your present, my present, it's not always full of rejoicing, is it? If we're in Christ, we're looking forward to an eternal future that's full of unparalleled, undiluted rejoicing, rejoicing, but our present, it's tinged by sufferings and trials and difficulties and obstacles and disappointments.

And the implied question that James is responding to here is why? Has God failed? Is he not able to follow through on his promises? When I pray for things that are clearly in line with God's revealed will and then God doesn't answer them positively, what am I supposed to think?

What's the point of trials? What's the point of disappointments, of dashed temporal hopes? Where do they come from? Well, you know, one thing's for sure.

When it comes to temptations, not so much trials in general, but temptations to sin, when it comes to active attempts to incite us to sin, there's one source they most definitely don't come from and that's God.

[19:11] James is as blunt as can be about that. Verse 12 and following, blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me, for God can't be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone, but each one is tempted when by his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed.

Then after desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Because every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of the heavenly lights who doesn't change like shifting shadows.

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth. We might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. So when it comes to being tempted, the source of our temptations, friends, there's no blaming God.

That being said, it's not as though God can't use them for good. Trials in general, but temptations that come from the evil one as well, it's not as though God can't use them for good.

[20:16] It's not as though he doesn't use them for good. We read in Genesis the way God's able to take evil and use it for good, the way he took Joseph's suffering and his brother's evil and he used that for good.

Likewise here, in his infinite power and wisdom, just as Jesus' suffering wasn't purposeless, just as Jesus' suffering had a redemptive purpose, the redemption of the elect, no less.

Likewise here, in verses 2 through 4, what James is saying is that there's a redemptive aspect to the trials that we experience. Christian, whatever trials or sufferings that you've experienced in the past or that you're currently experiencing, in God's wisdom, they're not to no purpose.

The battle we face against indwelling sin, the temptations that the evil one puts in our path, the trials we experience that are part and parcel of living as fallen people in a fallen world, God is able to take them and use them for good, use them to help us to persevere.

The trials that we experience, they aren't aberrations. They aren't abnormal. They're the norm. The message for the Bible is expect them. Worry if you're not experiencing them.

[21:38] Don't go looking for them, but don't worry when they come. Don't worry that God's abandoned you in particular. Why? Because as James writes, for Christians, when we experience trials, they're God's means of accomplishing His purposes for us, refining us, maturing us, helping us to persevere.

In the spirit of James, let me illustrate. I like to go to the gym regularly if I can. It's actually one of my favourite parts of the day. I tend to stick to cardio workouts, three or four good runs each week. I know that if I don't, I get irritable and I'm no good to anyone.

So as I say, I tend to stick pretty much to cardio workouts. In fact, the other side of the gym, the weightlifting zone, it's just way too intimidating for me in general.

But from the conversations I've had with the different species who inhabit the other side of the gym, you know, on the other side of that great divide, developing your weightlifting abilities all about developing muscle resistance.

Resistance to a muscle strengthens it over time. And you know, it's the same principle at work when it comes to our faith. Trials and suffering and disappointment, assaults on our hope, challenges to our trust in God's promises, resistance in the form of suffering.

[23:01] They're God's way of building hope, strengthening it. Without them, God knows that we become weak and flabby and complacent. Friends, what I'm saying is that the trials that we go through, far from being evidence that God doesn't care, they're evidence of his fatherly love for us.

God uses them to help fix our eyes on things above, our eternal hope that his way of helping us to get our eyes off fleeting things. He knows, he knows us, he knows how easily we get complacent.

He knows how idolatrous our hearts are. He knows how easily satisfied we are with stuff that won't satisfy us. That's why he sends trials our way.

Not because he hates us or because he's punishing us, but because he loves us. Now to be sure, God doesn't minimize the intensity of these trials, does he?

He doesn't tell us to be stoic about our grief, just get on with life, keep walking, have a stiff upper lip, et cetera, et cetera. He knows that these trials are hard and painful.

[24:12] He knows how potentially joyless they are for us. That's why in verse 2 when James says, consider it pure joy, my brothers, not pure misery, but pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds.

It comes as such a shock to our ears. And it's meant to. Which begs the question, doesn't it, when he says, consider it pure joy, my brothers, pure joy.

Not consider it joy tinged with sadness, my brothers, but consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds. Friends, what's he getting at? What's he getting at? How can he say that?

Something seemingly so paradoxical, so impossible from a human perspective. Now, is he calling us to take a masochistic delight in our trials?

Is he calling us just to redefine evil as good? Which brings us to the second call to action in our passage tonight. The call to pray, especially for God's wisdom.

[25:14] You know, James knows full well that humanly speaking, rejoicing in the midst of trials is an impossibility, a contradiction, an absurdity. That the only way we can do the impossible, the paradoxical, the only way we can rejoice in the midst of trials, the reason we should, in fact, is if we've got God's perspective on them.

Is if we're able to step outside of ourselves, if you will, and see what we're going through from God's vantage point. To see our trials as his means of refining us, growing us, maturing us.

In the midst of trials, persevering doesn't come naturally, let alone persevering with joy, which is exactly why we need to pray. Pray for God's wisdom.

Pray for God's perspective. Verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God. He gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind.

A man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all that he does. But you know, all of this still begs the question, doesn't it? This is where I want to end up this evening.

[26:31] When it comes to persevering and praying, when it comes to my, when it comes to your growth as a Christian, the question remains, when it comes to growth, what's my role and what's God's role?

Now, I mentioned at the start that Jesus is, that James is a call to action. But it begs the question, does this mean that our salvation, that it's a joint effort, a cooperative enterprise?

What's James teaching us here? When God saves me, justifies me. Is it a case of him putting me on the right path, but then it's up to me to stay on the narrow path? How does this growth thing, you know, sanctification, how does it work?

What's a constructive, biblical way of thinking about my role and God's role when it comes to growing in holiness? Now, I've said that James is very much a call to action. So as I finish up tonight, what I want to do is briefly respond to a couple of potential misunderstandings in that respect.

And the first is this. God calls us to persevere and to pray. We've seen as much. And at one extreme, there's a danger that we can easily start thinking that these are things that we can do in our own strength.

[27:50] That functionally, us growing as a Christian got everything to do with me and very little to do with God. We'll call this the God is my co-pilot view of Christian growth.

Most of you will probably remember the so-called miracle on the Hudson that happened a few years back. The successful ditching of US Airways Flight 1549 after it hit a bunch of Canada geese at 2,500 feet and lost both engines not long after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport.

The story was back in the news just a few weeks ago. The plane itself was salvaged from the river, all battered and bruised. And just a few weeks ago, it got transported to Charlotte, North Carolina, where it's going to be on display at an air museum.

Thinking back to that flight in January 2009, there were two pilots on that aircraft when it took off. Geoffrey Skiles, the co-pilot, and then there was Chelsea Sullenberger, the pilot.

When the birds hit the plane with a thud, Skiles, the co-pilot, was at the controls. And Sullenberger, the pilot, immediately realised what was at stake.

[29:01] Skiles still had the controls at this point. Sullenberger was busy trying to restart the engines, the flight recording showing that he tried for about 15 seconds or thereabouts, which must have surely seemed like an eternity.

Time was ticking, but nothing was working. And it was at this point that the Sully show began. His pulse rate must have been through the roof, but very calmly, he announced, my aircraft.

He took over the controls and the rest, as they say, was history. From that point onwards, with all due respect to Geoffrey Skiles, to all intents and purposes, as co-pilot, he was just along for the ride.

my aircraft, said Sully. And from that point onward, he was in charge. He had the controls. The buck stopped with him.

And when it comes to growing as a Christian, there's a tendency for us to see God in the same ways. They're not. God is my co-pilot. The implicit assumption being when push comes to shove, when it comes to affecting change in my life, strength to persevere, the will to pray, I'm in charge.

[30:11] My aircraft, not God's. But when it comes to growing in holiness, God's just along for the ride. I'm the pilot. He's the co-pilot.

Friends, what I'm saying is, on the one hand, the danger is that we start thinking that God saves me, God justifies me, but then it's up to me to stay saved. God's got me in, but then it's up to me to stay in.

God's planted me, but it's up to me to grow. Now, friends, this is a serious error, and it's not what James is all about. God isn't my co-pilot, and he's not your co-pilot either.

He's our creator and our sustainer. And if we're in Christ, he's both the author and perfecter of our faith. We're justified by grace alone, and we're no less sanctified by grace alone either.

Whatever persevering we're doing, whatever praying we're doing, it's by God's grace that we're doing. That's the first danger, that when it comes to us persevering and growing and maturing as Christians, God's just along for the ride, if you will.

[31:18] But you know, there's another danger as well, isn't there? The opposite extreme. You know, if one extreme's that my persevering is ultimately up to me, the alternative extreme's the idea that my persevering and growing hasn't got anything to do with me.

we might call it the just let go and let God approach. As though sanctification just magically happens. As though we get saved one day and wake up the next morning and suddenly find that all of our sinful habits and destructive patterns of living have just magically disappeared.

Friends, if you've lived the Christian life for even a short while, you know that this just isn't how it works. Christian growth doesn't happen that way. There's something superficially pietistic about saying just let go and let God, but that passivity.

Friends, it's hard to reconcile. It's impossible to reconcile with the imperatives that we see in our passage this evening in James. Persevering is an active thing. Praying is an active thing.

There's nothing passive about these activities in the slightest. There's nothing passive about the Christian life. It's God who gives us the growth, but it doesn't happen to us passively. If you're not sending out your resume, if you're not actively applying for jobs, don't be surprised if you're not getting any job offers.

[32 : 40] In much the same way, if you're not praying for God's strength to persevere, if you're not praying that God would give you joy in the midst of trials, his eyes to see that he's working all things for the good of those who love him, if you're not praying for his wisdom, if you're not praying full stop, don't be surprised if there's little or no growing.

Friends, on a corporate level, if we're not praying for this church to grow in maturity and numbers, we shouldn't be surprised if it isn't, if it doesn't.

If you're not praying that God would open doors for you to share Jesus with others, don't be surprised when those conversations aren't happening. Conversely, if you're actively putting yourself in situations where you know that you're going to be tempted to fall back into old ways of living, don't be surprised then when you fall.

If you aren't striving after growth, if you're just waiting for it to magically happen, then you've got the wrong idea about how sanctification works and things need to change, friends.

What I'm saying is this, this growth that James is exhorting us to, it isn't something that we can do in our own strength. It's not a matter of mustering the resolve and pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps.

[34 : 00] The rebirth that God gives us and our growth in holiness, they are both God's doing. This is all for his glory.

It's all for his praise. So friends, as we begin this series in James, pray that by God's grace we will be those who strive to persevere, to grow in our walk with him, not in our own strength, but confident that the God who gives generously, the author and perfecter of our faith, is working in us and through us to act according to his good purpose.

Let's pray to that end, shall we? Let's pray together. Father, you've said to us in your words, speaking of Jesus, that in your wisdom he had to be made like us, like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, that he might make atonement for the sins of the people, because he himself suffered when he was tempted.

He is able to help those who are being tempted now. Father, we thank you for the good news that these verses are, for the comfort that they are, that in the midst of our trials and sufferings, you haven't abandoned us, Lord, but instead you're a good and gracious God, that you're working all things for the good of those who love you.

Father, continue to do your work in us, conform us more and more to the image and likeness of our saviour Jesus, by your grace, enable us to be a persevering people and a praying people, so we ask in Jesus' name and for his sake.

[35 : 41] Amen.