

# "Spiritual War"

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Revelation chapter 12? That's page 971 in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there, Revelation chapter 12.

So we've come to the middle of this great and bracing book of Revelation. And here, at the midway point, I think it's good to remind ourselves that Revelation was written to everyday churches a lot like our own.

Churches trying to live faithfully for the Lord Jesus, but beset by many challenges and trials. You can go back and read chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation and learn more about the churches to whom John was writing.

Some of them faced persecution. Some of them faced false teaching and deception. And others faced what we might call seduction. The world around them had captivated their hearts and led them away from an earnest devotion to Jesus.

And I think it's easy in the middle of everyday life, as we kind of grind it out day by day, it's easy to lose sight of the big story. It's easy to miss the deeper realities at work.

[ 1 : 0 4 ] And part of what Revelation is meant to do is to give us that fresh perspective, to pull back the curtain on spiritual reality, and to show us the deeper realities at work, so that we can live in line with what's really real.

Revelation, in a sense, is meant to kind of break through the narratives that the world tells about who we are and where we are, and show us the deeper spiritual reality by which we can live really authentic and faithful lives to God.

And that's what John's going to be doing in the next few chapters, chapters 12, 13, and 14. He's going to be really pulling back the curtain to help us see spiritual reality for what it is. So, let's pick up this middle portion of the book of Revelation in chapter 12.

I'm going to read the whole chapter for us. John writes this. He says, And another sign appeared in heaven.

She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.

[ 2 : 4 0 ] But her child was caught up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

Now, war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives, even unto death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, in you who dwell in them. But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short.

[ 3 : 51 ] And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time and times and half a time.

The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring and on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. So we'll pause there because the rest of verse 17 actually introduces the next chapter, which we'll get to next week.

Okay, so John, using deeply symbolic language, is pulling back the curtain on reality to help us see what's really real, to help us know the story in which we live our lives. And if we were to sum it up, one way to do so would be like this.

Chapter 12 is telling us that you are in a war, that the victory has been secured, but that the battle still rages on. You are in a war, the victory has been secured, but the battle still rages on.

[ 5 : 15 ] So the first paragraph, verses 1 through 6, show us the first point. You are in a war. John introduces us here to the three main figures of this passage, a woman, a child, and a dragon.

Let's consider briefly kind of each one. The woman is said to be clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars. Now, the 12 stars is an immediate hint as to who this woman represents.

In the Old Testament, the number 12 almost always alludes to the 12 tribes of Israel. In fact, this particular image of sun, moon, and stars seems to be an allusion to the book of Genesis.

If you remember the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, Joseph has a dream, right, in Genesis 37. And one of his dreams is of the sun, the moon, and 11 stars, him being the 12th, bowing down to him.

And what do the sun, moon, and stars there represent in Joseph's dream? Well, they represent Joseph's father and mother and brothers. In other words, they represent the people of Israel, God's covenant family in the Old Testament era.

[ 6 : 17 ] So this woman then represents God's people. And we see that this woman is pregnant and crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.

It's interesting that the word agony there is almost always used not actually in relation to giving birth, but for the suffering of God's people in persecution and trial. So what's the picture then?

The picture is that this woman is an image of God's Old Testament people in trial and hardship, waiting for a child to be born. And so we come to the second character, the child.

And who is this child? Verse 5 says, She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. Now, this is a very clear reference to the Messiah, the one who would come from Israel and rule all nations.

The rod of iron is an obvious literary allusion to Psalm 2, that great messianic psalm about when God installs his king, his son on his royal throne in Zion, and all the nations become his inheritance, and he rules them with a rod of iron.

[ 7 : 26 ] And if you look ahead in Revelation to chapter 19, verse 15, we see there that there's no question for John who this Messiah is. Who is it that wields this rod of iron, that is this shepherd's staff of unbreakable strength?

Well, in Revelation 19, 15, it's clearly the Lord Jesus who will one day return in power and before whom every knee will bow. And so, with this vision of a woman and her child, John is bringing before our view the great story of the Old Testament, that from Eve, the mother of all living, all the way to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the people of God have survived through many trials awaiting the coming of the king.

And at last, in the person of Jesus, he came. But there's a third figure here, the dragon. Now, looking ahead to verse 9, we see exactly who this dragon represents.

John says it's that ancient serpent, harkening back to Genesis 3, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. And the dragon here is depicted as having seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems, that is, seven crowns.

And of course, it's, you know, that sort of fearsome image. It's a picture, on the one hand, of ferocity, right? A seven-headed beast would be the fullness of terror. And it's also a picture, not just of ferocity, but of power, right?

[ 8 : 57 ] Horns are a classic image of power and strength in the Old Testament. And here, this dragon has ten of them. So it's ferocious, it's powerful, and it's also a picture of blasphemy.

Only God is truly worthy to be crowned. And yet, this dragon usurps a crown for each of its heads. And we're told that this dragon stood before the woman, actively seeking to devour the child.

I mean, consider, if you will, the history of the Old Testament people of God from the murder of Abraham, or excuse me, from the murder of Abel, right after they're banished from the garden, the murder of Abel, to the machinations of Pharaoh in Egypt, to Saul's murderous pursuit of David, to Haman's edict to murder the Jews in the book of Ruth, to the persecutions perpetrated by Antiochus Epiphanes that's foretold in the book of Daniel, even to the raging of Herod as he seeks to massacre the children of Bethlehem.

Who or what was at work? It was that ancient serpent, the deceiver of the whole world, seeking to devour the child of the woman.

We're told in verse 4 that his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. Now, this could be referring to fallen angels who joined Satan in his primordial rebellion against God, but it's just as likely that this verse is an allusion to the book of Daniel, chapter 8, verse 10.

[ 10 : 38 ] In Daniel, chapter 8, verse 10, the murder of God's people by Antiochus Epiphanes is likened to stars being thrown down and trampled. Those stars that adorn the head of the woman, those stars that God loves and cherishes, it's Satan's desire to persecute and destroy them if only he might devour the child to come.

And why is the dragon so bent on pursuing this woman and devouring this child? Because he knows that this child is the center of God's plan to bring about his defeat and to put an end to all his forces of sin and death and destruction once and for all.

The promise goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Do you remember the promise given in Genesis 3, 15? We read it earlier in the service. To the serpent, God says, I'll put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. Yes, the serpent would strike the heel of the offspring of Eve, but the child would in turn crush the serpent's head.

And from this first glimmer of the gospel before the very gates of Eden, the rest of the Old Testament story begins to grow. Looking, waiting, hoping through great trial and suffering for the offspring, for the child, for the king to come.

[ 12 : 14 ] Waiting, hoping, until when the fullness of time had come. God sent an angel to a virgin named Mary and through Mary the promise made to Eve was finally fulfilled.

The long years of travail had come to their greatest hour and the king was born. And was this king devoured by the dragon? No, John says.

Her child was caught up to God and to his throne. It's a pretty short summary of the life of Jesus, isn't it? But it puts our focus in the right place for the reality that John wants us to see.

Jesus was caught up to God. The verb means taken up forcefully. Though Satan thought he had won, crucifying Jesus, putting him to death, the resurrection forcefully broke through Satan's supposed victory as the Messiah was caught up from death and brought to God.

And brought to God and his throne in the ascension of Jesus. He was enthroned taking his rightful place at the Father's right hand. So what are we meant to take away then from this first paragraph?

[ 13 : 31 ] Well, John's kind of pulling back the curtain and showing us that the story we live in, the world we live in, is a world in the midst of war.

It's not ultimately a physical war between nation states. It's a spiritual war. There's an enemy of the people of God and of the kingdom of God. And he'll do whatever he can to thwart and devour the people of this king.

And friend, if you've placed your faith in Jesus, then you are in this company of saints represented by this woman. Paul says in Galatians 3 very clearly, it's those who have faith in Jesus who are the sons of Abraham.

Whether you're Jew or Gentile, if you believe in Jesus as the Messiah, then you too are part of God's covenant family. You too are her offspring, as verse 17 later in our passage says.

And that means you woke up this morning in the middle of a great war. As you were making your coffee, as you were listening to the news, as you were flipping through Instagram, whatever you do in the morning, I don't know.

[ 14 : 42 ] You woke up in the middle of a war. Imagine John's first readers, you know, picture perhaps the church at Laodicea at the end of chapter 3.

One of those original recipients of this long letter we call Revelation. You know, the typical Christian at Laodicea, we're told, would wake up and, you know, they'd be tempted to say, I'm rich, I've prospered, I sort of need nothing.

They could go about their day and their greatest concern was how they looked to their friends in the marketplace. How similar we are today to the church of Laodicea.

But John is saying, open your eyes, shake off your complacency. It may seem like all is well in your world.

You may be tempted to just drift through your days, chasing the world's prizes and favors, but don't you see you're in a war? Shake off your lethargy.

[ 15 : 45 ] Stop hunting for the latest gadget that will entertain you out of your boredom. Stop living as if your life is just a series of promotions until you can comfortably retire.

Those are stories that the world wants to tell you, but that's not the real story. You see, one of the greatest tactics of our enemy is to convince us that there really isn't a spiritual battle going on.

And then we can simply drift through life, neither hot nor cold, imagining that we're just sort of neutral. But there is no neutral ground, not in the spiritual war.

Either our allegiance is given to the child king and he commands our steps, or we remain under the sway of the dragon. Of course, on the surface it doesn't look that way.

And yes, it is true that in this life every human heart and every human institution will always be a mix of common grace and of rejection of God, both at the same time.

[ 16 : 57 ] But at the deepest level, where is your allegiance? There's a war going on for your very soul, and there's a war going on for the very heart of every person you and I meet, and there's a very real enemy who seeks to devour.

But you know, lest our vigilance and our alertness give way to fear and panic, John's shows us the second part of this vision.

In the second paragraph, verses 7 through 12, we see not just that we're in a war, but that the victory has been secured. The victory has been secured.

Verse 7 begins by describing a war in heaven. And at first, we might think that this speaks of that original fall of Satan and his primordial rebellion against God, but you know, as we read more carefully, we realize that what's being described here is not the fall of Satan at the time of creation, but the defeat of Satan in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Verses 10 and 11 make this clear. And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God, and they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they love not their lives, even unto death.

[ 18 : 32 ] So we see that this war in heaven is something that ensues because Jesus has triumphed through his earthly ministry. He shed his blood for sins. He's taken the place of authority at God's right hand in his resurrection and ascension.

And because of what Jesus has done, now Satan no longer has a rightful place in heaven to stand and accuse the people of God. So we're told that Michael, Michael who in the book of Daniel is depicted as sort of an angelic protector of God's people.

So Michael and the other angels now ensuing on Jesus' triumph, they drive Satan out of heaven. We see this same idea actually in other places of the New Testament.

Consider John chapter 12 verses 31 through 32. Jesus is on the verge of going to the cross and he says, now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be cast out and I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself.

So there Jesus looks ahead to his own passion to the cross and resurrection saying that Satan's going to be cast out because of what I'm about to do. Or think about Colossians 2.15 where Paul says, God disarmed the rulers and authorities and he means the heavenly demonic rulers and authorities.

[ 19 : 46 ] God disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame. How? By triumphing over them in him, Colossians says, meaning in Christ crucified.

Or we might also go on to Hebrews chapter 2 verses 14 through 15. Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things. He became flesh and blood for us.

Why? That through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

But now we might ask a question. How? How does the death and resurrection of Jesus defeat Satan and cast him down from heaven? What's the connection? How does that win the ultimate victory?

Well, the answer to that is found in that word accuser. Verse 10, the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down who accuses them day and night before our God.

[ 20 : 51 ] You see, friends, before Christ came, Satan actually had a right to stand in heaven before God's throne and accuse God's people of their guilt and sin. And we actually see this depicted in Job chapters 1 and 2 and we see it again in the book of Zechariah chapter 3.

Satan stands in heaven and brings his charges against God's people. In fact, that's what the name Satan literally means, the accuser. And the truth is, his accusations are just.

After all, who among us has not sinned against God? Who among us does not truly deserve death as the penalty for their heart's rebellion against our Creator?

The accuser makes his case. And friends, the tragedy is against all of us, that case is airtight. We stand condemned. Unless, unless, there could be one to stand in our place.

One who could represent us before the throne. One who could enter the heavenly courtroom, sit down in the dock where we sit accused and guilty and say, I'll pay their penalty.

[ 22 : 11 ] I will let the sentence fall on me. And this is exactly what Christ has done. The same passage from Colossians 2 that speaks of Christ defeating Satan at the cross explains how he's done it.

Paul writes in Colossians 2, 13 through 14, and you who were dead in your trespasses. God made alive together with him, having forgiven all of our trespasses.

How? By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Every accusation that Satan could make against you and I, every sin, past, present, and future, the record of debt with its legal demands, every single sentence of guilt and condemnation that you rightly deserve has been nailed to the cross, Paul says.

As the hammers drove the nails through the hands and feet of Jesus, your sins were being pinned to the sinless one. The just sentence of death was being paid for each one.

[ 23 : 28 ] Why? So that you could stand before the throne of God completely innocent and free. And so that the voice of the accuser might have no right any longer to speak.

This is why Paul can say in Romans 8, no one can bring a charge against God's elect. Not even angels or principalities or powers. Nothing can now separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so because of the love of Christ and his work on the cross for you and me, the devil's been thrown down, cast from the heavenly courtroom with no place to stand.

But of course, the dragon still tries this tactic today, doesn't he? He will still come to you and show you your sins and failings.

And he will say, a real Christian wouldn't do something like that. God could never accept you. You're worthless. You're lost. Just give up.

[ 24 : 37 ] You've tried so hard to follow God. His rules are so impossible. What's the point of even trying? Accusation, accusation, accusation.

Are you able, Christian, to recognize the voice of the accuser? The voice of the Holy Spirit convicting you of sin will bring you to life and freedom at the cross.

The voice of the accuser will drive you away, miring you in guilt and shame. Friends, he has been cast down and that's what he'll try to do, cast you down.

Get you to think that your forgiveness is conditional. Try to get you to think that God's love for you is based on your performance, that God's acceptance of you is based on your efforts and your achievements.

But friends, that's not the gospel. Christianity is not be a good person so that God will forgive and accept you. Satan would love you to think that that's the message of Christianity, but it's not.

[ 25 : 41 ] The message of Christianity is this, you could never be good enough. you've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death, but God loves you and sent his son to die in your place for your sin so that you can be accepted because of his work and not your own.

The song we sang earlier I think says it pretty well. Before the throne of God above I have a strong and perfect plea, a great high priest whose name is love.

Whoever lives and pleads for me, my name is graven on his hands. My name is written on his heart. I know that while in heaven he stands, no tongue can bid me thence to part.

When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see him there who made an end to all my sin. Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him Jesus and pardon me.

You're in a war brothers and sisters but the victory has ultimately been won. Let not the voice of the accuser bring you to guilt and despair. He has been cast down.

[ 27 : 05 ] That's the second point of our passage. But now lest we think that the battle is simply over and that's all that there is to say. John gives us one more piece of the story.

In the third paragraph verses 13 through 17 we see that even though the decisive victory has been won, the battle still rages on. This battle still rages on.

I think the analogy of World War II has often been used to describe the spiritual reality and I think it's a helpful one. You know when the allied forces landed at Normandy and gained a foothold on the continent it was a sign that the tide had turned and the Axis powers would eventually fall.

But you know from D-Day to victory in Europe there were still 11 long months right? Or at least that's what I remember from history class. And you know that's a bit of what we see here.

Satan is cast down from heaven. His accusations are now finished but on earth he still fights to devour as many as he can knowing that his time is short.

[ 28 : 07 ] John sees the dragon's attacks flowing like a river issuing from his mouth trying to sweep away the people of God in its flood. And indeed when you read church history you will see that there has been a flood of persecutions of false teachings of seasons of complacency and compromise that have nearly drowned the church.

Given that this flood issues from the mouth of the dragon this vision might be particularly speaking of the false teaching and deception that the devil has constantly tried to use against the church.

It's as if his accusations have been foiled by the work of Christ then he will try to use his deceptions to keep as many people away from the finished work of the gospel as possible. And so church history tells us of a river of heresies and false teachings that have run through the church.

Some denying the full deity of Christ. Some denying the full humanity of Christ. Some denying the free grace of God. Some denying the sufficiency and authority of scripture and on and on they go.

But Satan's deceptions also try to reach to our hearts. Remember how he came to Eve in the garden trying to get her to question God's word and God's character.

[ 29 : 27 ] Did God really say? God knows that when you eat this you'll be like him. In other words, God's trying to keep something good from you, you know. You can't trust him. His tactics haven't changed.

He sort of has the same playbook and he just keeps playing it over and over and over again. Like a flood, he's going to try to get us to doubt God's word and doubt God's character. And yet as the battle rages on, God promises to preserve his church.

John sees the woman given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness. What a beautiful image. It's taken actually from Exodus 19.

Just like the people of the Old Testament were said to be brought out of Egypt on eagle's wings into the wilderness to be with God. That great picture of their rescue from Pharaoh's death and destruction to be with God in his presence in the wilderness.

So the New Testament church will be carried by God and protected from Satan's attacks. The wilderness was often a place in the Old Testament where God purified and protected his people.

[ 30 : 41 ] And we're told here that there in the wilderness the earth opens its mouth and swallows the destructive waters of the dragon. Just like in Exodus 15 the earth is said to swallow Pharaoh and his chariots or like number 16 the earth is said to swallow Korah's rebellion as they rebelled against God's goodness and God's word.

So the sovereign God will continue to protect his people from all that threatens to destroy them. Though we live in the final stages of the great spiritual battle though we have an enemy bent on washing us away God will not allow his people to be overcome.

And there in the wilderness John says they'll be nourished for a time times and half a time. As Pastor Matt mentioned last week this number comes up often in the book of Revelation and it comes up in different forms.

Earlier in this passage it was given as 1260 days. In chapter 11 it was called 42 months. And here again it's called time times and half a time which is one time times two and a half.

It's all three and a half. 42 months is three and a half years. If a month is 30 days then 1260 days is three and a half years. Just different ways of talking about this same period of time.

[ 31 : 58 ] But what's the significance of three and a half years? Well one clue that John may be using this number in a symbolic way is found right here in Revelation 12. We see in verse 6 that immediately after the ascension of Jesus when he's caught up to be with God in his throne it says the woman fled into the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God in which she is to be nourished for 1260 days or a time times and half a time.

In other words that period starts at the ascension of Jesus. So it seems to be that John's saying that the whole period from Christ's ascension to his return will be covered by that time times and half a time.

And that makes sense when you look at where this phrase comes from in the Old Testament. In the book of Daniel time times and half a time was a way of speaking about an intense time of persecution for God's people that will ultimately and graciously be cut short by God's rescue and judgment.

Three and a half after all is half of seven. You can tell I did really well in math right? If seven represents a full or complete cycle of trial and persecution and suffering God's going to cut it in half and rescue his people at just the right time when the times get hard and it feels like it's turning into times of hardship God says that's when it will come to an end and I will rescue you.

at just the right time. Now of course there are other ways of understanding this number. Some Christians believe that this number could represent the three and a half years of suffering during the Jewish war of 66 to 70 AD when the temple was eventually destroyed.

[ 33 : 43 ] That was a time of great suffering. Some think that this number represents a three and a half year period of intense persecution just before Jesus returns. And the reality is I think John's vision could speak to all of these just like Old Testament prophecy.

Revelation has multiple horizons of fulfillment. But I think John's pastoral point to his churches is the same. We live in a time of trial, of battle, of hardship.

There will be days when it seems like the fight is overwhelming, like a flood. Yeah, there will be days when it seems like the earth opens its mouth and swallows the whole trial and brings relief. But not always.

But through it all there's coming a day when this time will end. This period won't last forever. Just like it didn't last forever in the Jewish war, just like it won't last forever, right before Jesus comes it won't last forever.

Just when you think your strength is giving way, just when you think you can't hold out any longer, God's rescue will come. And we know that will ultimately be true one day.

[ 34 : 49 ] The king who was caught up to God and to his throne, who cast Satan down from heaven, he will return bodily in glory. And the great dragon will be condemned forever.

And he will be removed from the earth once and for all. And the church will reign with Christ for eternity in a new heavens and a new earth. Yes, friends, the battle still rages on.

Yes, we need to take up the armor of God each day. And if you're wondering, how do I do that? You can come to Sunday school. Because we're going through Ephesians and we're going to talk about the armor of God. Yes, we need to immerse ourselves in God's word and God's gospel to ready ourselves for the fight, to be ready against these floods that come our way.

Yes, we need to bear witness even if it means losing what we love, even our own lives. But friends, one day the battle will end. The time is short, friends.

So don't give up. Stand firm against the devil's accusations and lies, knowing that he is ultimately a defeated foe. Stand firm in your King, the Lord Jesus.

[ 35 : 57 ] He will win the battle. Did we in our own strength confide? Our striving would be losing, Martin Luther wrote many years ago.

We're not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Do you ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he, the Lord of hosts his name, from age to age the same, and he must win the battle.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, help us now in these quiet moments to be reminded again that if we are in the midst of trial, persecution, suffering, Lord, that you promise to win the victory one day.

Lord, this life may not be full of ease and comfort. In fact, you promise us that it won't be, but we know there's coming a great and glorious day when the battle will be won and you will be all in all.

So encourage our hearts now to keep up in the fight. Equip us with what we need, help us to encourage one another in this race. And Lord, if we've grown complacent, if we've grown stagnant, if we've grown sleepy, Lord, by your Holy Spirit, cause us to wake up.

[ 37 : 38 ] Renew our vision, renew our zeal for you and for your kingdom. Silence the voice of the accuser. Help us to stand in the truth of your word against his deceptions.

And Lord, we pray that through our witness as a church, many would come to know the forgiving, liberating grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pray this in his name. Amen. Amen.