

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

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Before we read God's word and look at it together, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you with just one simple request. This morning, we pray that you would show us Your glory. And we are bold to ask this, Lord, even as Moses did and received an answer from You. For we know that You delight to show Your people Your glory. And Lord, this is our heart's desire, Lord, to gaze upon the glory of God. And so, open our eyes, speak to us now, we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Let us read together Psalm 23, a Psalm of David. "He leads me in clean pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This Psalm is easily one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. This and maybe John 3:16; chances are, if someone's heard of something from the Bible, it's one of those. It's a short Psalm, six verses. It's simple. Its imagery is clear and compelling. And really, what the psalmist is doing here is he's painting some pictures for us. He paints four pictures. And it's just a delight for everyone, really, to see these images that the psalmist paints.

Image number one is in verses one to three. And you can see in this the shepherd watching over his flock, gently leading them over green hills with quiet streams bubbling down. You can feel the peace. You can see the shepherd wandering easily amongst his sheep. You can see them peaceful and at rest. They're not worried. They're fully provided for. This picture speaks of the Lord providing all that a sheep needs. A sheep needs food. A sheep needs water. A sheep needs a restoration of their soul, of their life. And a sheep needs a leading hand. And this is what we need. As God's people, we need these things. We need the Lord's hand to be active in providing our every need.

When the psalmist says in verse one, "I shall not want," he's speaking not of the shepherd providing everything he wants but of the shepherd providing everything he needs. The idea is, "I shall not lack anything necessary. My life shall not be deficient." The shepherd in this picture knows his sheep and ensures they receive all they need.

And then it's easy in our mind's eye, because of the beauty of this psalm, to shift into the next picture in verse four. It's not as pleasant a picture as the sheep wanders off into deep darkness. That's the idea of that phrase, "the valley of the shadow of death." It's a valley that's full of deep darkness. And if you want a very compelling image of that, you can go and read of a Christian's journey through the valley of the shadow of death in Pilgrim's Progress. But you can make out the steep cliffs and the ragged rocks through the dimness of this valley. You can see the sheep tottering near the edge of a narrow path, almost stumbling, almost falling, unable to see where he's going, surrounded by dangers on every side.

And the sheep can't see him, but he feels the shepherd's rod gently on his shoulder, nudging him back onto the path. You cannot see the jackals and the wolves, but you can hear them through the inky blackness. But the shepherd is ready, once again unseen, wielding his rod, protecting his sheep, striking those enemies that come too close. And the psalmist then gloriously shifts our attention to another image. The shepherd is now a host of a great feast in verse 5. The sheep are guests at his table. This table, though, is not set in green pastures. Instead, it's laid out in the presence of enemies. Foes surround this place, but the guests at the table have a peace that surpasses understanding as the Lord lays out their table.

They're calm. They are once again well-provided for because their shepherd-host fills their plates and their cups and tends to their needs. And as the picture changes one last time in verse 6, we see goodness and mercy literally chasing the psalmist. The idea of "following me" is an active word. It pursues me, chasing him into the Lord's house. Can you see the sheep running down the path as goodness and mercy, like a sheepdog, herds him into the house of the Lord? And can you picture this glorious door? Can you picture the sheep running down the path as goodness and mercy, like a sheepdog, herds him into the house of the Lord? And can you picture this glorious dwelling?

It's the picture we receive in Revelation 21:1, a great garden city. Glorious, golden, peaceful, and perfect. There we find the Lord Himself living with His people in uninterrupted face-to-face fellowship. This is not the deep darkness where the face of the Lord cannot be seen, only His guiding hand felt. This is not a table in the presence of enemies, great blessing

but in full view of the fight. This is final comfort. Rolling fields, rich grass paddocks, gentle flowing creeks. It's almost as if we're taken back to the image at the beginning of the psalm. As we rest in the shade of tall trees outside the house of the Lord with a smiling, joyful shepherd watching over, walking amongst his sheep, standing by his sheep.

These are the four pictures of Psalm 23, and they're immensely attractive, I think. Do you want to be a part of these pictures? Do you want to be a part of these scenes? As you picture these in your mind's eye, do you say, "Yes, that's what I want for me"? You see, the reason Christians have loved this psalm for thousands of years is because these images describe for us the Christian life. They describe the Christian hope and the Christian experience. And that is absolutely key to understanding the psalm.

Sadly, this psalm is used in many, many funerals. Funerals of people who do not know this shepherd. This psalm does not speak of them. The shepherd of this psalm is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God who has shown Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who said in John 10 that He is the shepherd. He is the shepherd, and in that passage, Jesus says that the mark of His sheep is that they hear His voice and follow Him. This is John 10:14-16, where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."

So before we dig into just one aspect of this psalm a bit deeper, I want to make this very clear. If you have not heard the voice of Jesus calling you, and if you have not responded to His call, then this psalm does not speak of you. The Lord is not your shepherd. You will lack. You will not lie down in green pastures nor be led beside still waters. Your soul will not be restored. You will walk in paths of unrighteousness. You will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and you will fear evil because there will be no rod or staff to guide and protect you. When you are in the presence of your enemies, you will find no provision, no cup, no rest, no hope. You will not know what it is to have the Lord pour out oil on your head and fill your cup to overflowing. Judgment, guilt, evil, shame, and pain will pursue you all the days of your life until you are finally cast out from the house of the Lord forever.

Don't think that you can lean on this psalm when times become difficult. Don't think you can have this psalm read out at your funeral. Don't think that when sickness overwhelms you, and you lie there in your hospital bed, you can have this psalm read over you and find peace. This psalm gives no comfort to those who have not known the Lord as their shepherd. So if you

see your need of a savior today, if you see your need of a shepherd today, if you see those images that this psalmist has painted and say, "Yes, my soul longs after that. I need that. I need a shepherd who leads me and provides for me. I need a shepherd who watches over me and guides me. I need rest in the presence of my enemies. I need a hope that cannot fail." Then there is hope for you.

If you see your need of a shepherd, then hear Jesus' voice today and follow Him. Repent and trust in Christ as your shepherd, and you will find that He is ready and willing and able to care for your soul. But for those of us who have found this shepherd, I want to dig a little bit more deeper into just one aspect of Psalm 23. Psalm 23 speaks to us of an active shepherd. Look through this psalm once more and notice who is doing activity, who is working in this psalm. It's the Lord. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness. I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death; I'll fear no evil. Why? For He is with me. His rod and His staff are a comfort to me. It is the Lord who prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. It is the Lord who anoints my head with oil. It's implied, but it's the Lord who pours wine into my cup so that it overflows. The goodness and the mercy that pursues me are the Lord's goodness and the Lord's mercy, chasing me all the way to His home that He has prepared for me. What's the sheep doing in this psalm? Nothing It's the shepherd who is doing. It is the shepherd who is active. And this should strike us as really unusual. The Lord of a house does not serve at the table. Maybe He does today, but that's because we've been shaped by this psalm. But when Abraham welcomed the Lord Himself to his table, Abraham goes out, he grabs a cow, and he brings it to a young man, and he says, "You prepare it." He says to his wife, "You bake bread." When the father in the story of the prodigal son wants to throw a feast, does he go and prepare the meal? No. He says to his servants, "Go, kill the fatted calf, prepare a feast for us." But here in Psalm 23, we find the Lord doing the demeaning, lowly work of serving His sheep.

Preparing a table for David, saying, "David, would you like more wine? David, you've run out of bread. Can I fill your plate for you? David, your head needs anointing. Let me pour oil on it." But it's not just the preparing of a table that's demeaning for a great Lord. Every activity in this psalm is demeaning, is not fit for a king, for a Lord, for a master of a house. The Lord of a great flock does not shepherd the flock. Shepherd work is filthy, stinky, and lowly. It's the job that young David does, not his father Jesse. It's the sort of work that Laban employs Jacob to do, rather than doing it himself. It's the sort of work that once Jacob becomes a wealthy patriarch with sons, he sends his sons out to do the work. "You go be with the sheep."

But here in this psalm, we find the Lord Himself walking amongst the sheep, watching over them, guiding them, tending to their every need in every situation they may find themselves in. And keep in mind that this is the Lord we're speaking of. The first four words of this psalm should just floor us. "The Lord is my shepherd." And the Lord there, all capital letters, it makes you think of the covenant God of Israel. The God who appears in a burning bush and says to Moses, "Take off your sandals, for this is holy ground." The Lord who appears on Sinai in flashings of thunder, in flame, and in smoke. The Lord who smites Egypt, destroys them with plagues. The Lord who appears to Israel in a cloud by day and a cloud of fire by night. The Lord of glory. The Lord of hosts.

And this Lord shepherds His people. The awesome creator God, who is clothed in majesty and glory, who is holy, holy, holy. The God who is a consuming fire, a great and powerful God who rules the wind and waves and laughs at kings. This Lord is my shepherd. This Lord condescends to lead and guide and protect and feed and water and prepare a table and be with me in my dark hours and pursue me with goodness and mercy. This God is active in lowly, lowly ways for my benefit. And Christian, if you are one of the Lord's sheep, then He's doing that for you.

You know, recently I've been thinking a little bit about prayer, and I've felt at times uneasy with the fact that so many of my prayers are taken up with my needs. I just feel like surely that's not right. That I'm coming to this Lord of all, this God who is worthy of my praise, this God who actually wants fellowship with me. And I'm saying, "God, I need this. I need that. I need work. I need encouragement. I need this spiritual liveliness. I need humility. I need self-control. I need food. I need friends. God, I need all these things."

But you know, I don't think God grows tired of our needs. He created us as needy people, and He actually delights to be the God of Psalm 23. He delights to be the one who provides for you, for your needs, for my needs. Certainly, the shepherd is greater than the sheep, but the shepherd is so active for the sheep who are too weak and stupid and foolish and short-sighted to do anything themselves. And as we think about this, I want to just drill in on verse 5 in this psalm, where we see the Lord preparing a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

And a few questions that you can ask of any passage in scripture to help you see some of the riches and the glory that's contained in them are these: We can ask, how do we see Jesus in this passage? We can ask, how does Jesus live out this passage? How does Jesus make this passage something that can be mine? And how do we see the triune God on display? So I want to walk with you through just this verse for the rest of our time and try and

show you some of the answers to those questions.

The first thing I want us to see is that the reason we can live this psalm is because Jesus lived it first. He lived all the psalms, and we live them through Him. Which means that Jesus, even though in Psalm 10 says He's the shepherd, Jesus is also a sheep. Which is obvious if we think about it. Jesus is, after all, the Lamb of God. If His people are sheep, then it's clear that He became one of them when He took on flesh. He clothed Himself in wool.

So where did Jesus experience verse 5? Where did Jesus have a table prepared for Him in the presence of His enemies? Well, the Father prepares a table for Christ in the presence of His enemies. And I think a place that we see this most clearly is in the celebration of the Passover on the night of Jesus' betrayal. We read of it in John 13, which we'll look at in a moment. But over in Mark's account in Mark 14, and in Matthew, Matthew's account, Matthew 26, there are some unusual details that I've always been curious over. That I think help us to see something of this psalm.

Firstly, in Mark 14:19, we read of Jesus in peril. Verse 1 says, "And it is in this context, in the very presence of this great threat, in the presence of His enemies, as Mark is at pains to point out to us, that we read of Jesus going to a feast in Bethany, the house of Simon the leper. And as He sat at table, a woman came over with an alabaster jar of ointment, pure nard, very costly. And she broke the jar and poured it over His head." Where did this woman come from? Jesus didn't ask her to do it. The Father sent her. God the Father, with His providential care of Christ, in the very presence of His enemies, as the Jews stirred around seeking to kill Jesus Christ, God the Father sends a woman to anoint His head with oil. Isn't that remarkable? Here is Christ, the sheep, having His head anointed with oil in the presence of His enemies.

And then we see Jesus and His disciples preparing for the Passover just in the next few verses, and yet again, Mark and Matthew record interesting details. The disciples ask Jesus where He wants to eat the Passover. And Jesus tells them some really unusual instructions. He says, "Go into the city. You will see a man carrying a jar of water. Follow him. When he goes into the house, say to him, 'The Lord requires a place to celebrate the Passover.' And he will lead you to an upper room, which will be fully furnished and prepared. That's where we're going to eat the Passover." Where did this guy come from? The Father sent him. The Father literally prepared a place for Jesus to celebrate the Passover in the midst of His enemies with His people.

This Passover meal is supplied by the loving hand of Providence, which

is another way of saying that Jesus' Father shepherded Jesus, the sheep, and prepared a table for Him in the presence of His enemies. And it really was in the presence of His enemies. Who's at that table with Him? Judas. Judas, the betrayer. And the encouragement for us is, it's this same Father who shepherds His flock today. This same Father who could muster up a woman out of nowhere to anoint the head of Jesus Christ with oil. Who could prepare a table in an upper room that no one had even thought about, ready for Jesus. It's very practical, very earthy provision for Jesus Christ on the night of His betrayal. That same Father cares for you.

But Jesus is also the shepherd. He is also the one who prepares a table for His people. Luke tells us that when Jesus sat down to eat this Passover with His disciples, He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." Which brings a slightly new light to Psalm 23:5 because we start to see that ultimately, the goal of the shepherd is not to provide for us in the same way we might provide for a farm animal. I've watched farmers provide for their animals. They drive a tractor out, and they dump a bale of hay in a paddock, and they take a hose, and they fill up a trough with water, and the animals are well provided for. But I have never seen a farmer sit down and chat to his animals. I've never seen a farmer earnestly desire to sit down and eat hay with them. Right?

But that's what Jesus, the shepherd, ultimately wants to do. That's why He prepares a table in the presence of His enemies because He earnestly desires to eat with His disciples. Can you see Jesus pulling up His chair to the Passover meal, looking around at His disciples, and saying, "I am so excited for this night. I have waited to eat this meal with you." And by the way, these disciples, they're not the best meal guests at this time. Back at Bethany, just a few hours before, as this woman is showering oil on Jesus, the disciples are looking on, going, "Yeah, I reckon we could have sold that. Probably made some money and helped the poor. Not sure it's worth it. Seems a bit of a waste." At the table in the upper room at Passover, do you know what the disciples are doing? They're arguing about which of them is going to be the greatest. And Jesus says, "I love sitting down to dinner with you." As they're sitting there bickering, as they're saying, "I don't know if He's worth it, all this oil stuff," He's saying, "I want to eat. I want to sit with you."

And as we see back in Psalm 23, think of those pictures again, the four pictures of Psalm 23. The experience of the sheep changes in each of those pictures, but there's one consistent theme. Do you know what it is? The shepherd's there. In each of those pictures, the shepherd is present with his sheep. He's there in the green pastures. He's there in the dark valley. He's there as the enemies crowd the canvas. He's there in the final picture of a home, for it's his house that we dwell in. The provision of God is cele-

brated by David, but when all the provision is gone, and when all sight of the shepherd is hidden from view, when David is walking the valley of deep darkness, he says he will fear no evil. Why? Is it because he remembers the grass? Is it because he hopes that maybe he'll get a drink of water somewhere, or he saves some of the water? No, he's not fearing because the presence of God is with him.

It is the presence of the Lord that is the greatest comfort to David. And notice the personal aspect of this. The psalm began with David speaking about God and about God's provision. "The Lord is my shepherd. He does this for me. He does that for me." But when I come into deep darkness, and all visible displays of your presence are taken from me, I speak to you direct. "You are with me. Your rod, your staff, they comfort me." Here you see the heart of David, the heart of the sheep. "God, I want you. It's your presence. It's your presence that I need. All this other blessing, it's great. I love it, thank you, but it's you. It's you."

"You are with me" is the central line of Psalm 23 and is really the main theme. And we see that in the work of Jesus at the table in the Passover. His desire is to be with his sheep. It's not just what David wants; it's what the shepherd wants. And ultimately, this is the goal of Christ. This is the final goal of all history: God being with his people. And so it should be our goal that we would live with God.

But Jesus, the shepherd, we need to keep thinking of Him preparing a table for His people in the presence of their enemies. In John 13, we read of how Jesus places Himself in the position of a servant. Just as we saw the Lord being full of activity, lowly activity for His passive sheep in Psalm 23, so Jesus takes on the activity in the upper room during this last Passover. As He sits down with His disciples, He pauses midway through the meal, He rises from His place, takes off His jacket, takes off His shirt, He's left only in His undergarments as it were, and He wraps a towel around His waist, gets down on His knees with a basin of water, and picks up John's feet. They're sweaty, dusty, probably a little smelly. And Jesus gently washes them in the basin of water, and then pulls a corner of the towel that's wrapped around Him, and uses it to dry John's feet. Can you see it? It's astonishing. It's astonishing.

This is the active Lord of Psalm 23, caring for His sheep in lowly ways. This is Jesus' attitude towards His disciples. This is Christ's attitude toward you. He would wash your feet. If Jesus came in here this morning, and He was standing before you, He would wash your feet.

But He doesn't stop with foot washing. He goes on to start serving tables. He breaks bread and hands it to the disciples. He pours wine into a

cup and starts passing it around. Here is the master of the feast serving the guests. Hear that the Lord Jesus serves the first communion table. Which points us to the most remarkable and glorious way that Jesus provides a table for us in the presence of our enemies. Do you want to see the shepherd preparing a table for you in the presence of your enemies? Look at the cross.

For there is a mighty table full of goodness and mercy. There is bread and wine that satisfies the soul. Here is Christ's body broken that we might take it and eat. Here is Christ's blood shed that we might have cups not of God's wrath, but of God's forgiveness and goodness. Cups of sin-cleansing wine that overflow. And where is that table being prepared? In the very presence of every single one of our enemies. Around the cross, we see the human enemies of God's people, the hypocritical Pharisees, the wicked mobs, the rob of Jews, the ruthless Roman soldiers and politicians. Around the cross, we see the spiritual enemies of God's people, the spiritual forces of darkness who are powerfully at work to see Christ die. We see Satan entering Judas and tempting him to betray Jesus Christ. But we also see other enemies around this table. We see the enemies of death, pain, and suffering. We see the curse that is on this world because of the sin of mankind.

At the cross, Jesus Christ prepares a table in the very presence of death and pain, sorrow and loss, grief and suffering, curse. That's where He prepares the greatest table of all. And lastly, we see Jesus preparing a table for us in His own presence. For as a sinful people, God is our enemy, and Jesus is our judge. We have set ourselves against God, and so He is against us. Our sin cannot stand before His holiness and justice. We are by nature children of wrath, and yet at the cross, we see God Himself preparing a table for us in the presence of His wrath, of His justice.

Four great enemies, one magnificent table. And all those who come to the shepherd are invited to this table. All those who hear His voice and respond in faith and repentance are welcomed to take and eat the bread that is prepared for them. And to raise the cup which once was filled with the wrath of God, but has now had that wine turned into the wine of fellowship and gladness. One of the reasons we celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly is because this table is full to bursting. There is no lack there. Do you come weary and worn this week? Do you come buffeted by your enemies, harassed by sin, tempted by the devil and his angels? Do you come persecuted by your friends, your family, or your work colleagues? Do you come laden with guilt that you know you have before a holy God? The bread is ready and waiting. Your cup has been refilled and is flooding onto the table. Grace, mercy, forgiveness, protection, guidance, peace, and rest is here at the table of the cross, prepared for you in the presence of your enemies.

Jesus Christ Himself has taken off His robe this morning. He has wrapped Himself in a towel and is ready to wash your feet once more. To refresh you from your journeying this week. Did you notice what Jesus said to His disciples? To Peter, "You are already clean, but your feet are dirty. Come, let me wash them for you. Sit down. Let me bring you bread and wine. Receive. Let me restore your soul. Let me find you green pastures. Let me guide you through the darkness. I will do it all." This is the Lord of Psalm 23. This is the Jesus we serve. This is our God.

And even if you had a great week, Psalm 23 reminds us that you have simply been roaming in the fields of Jesus. Simply been roaming in the fields that Jesus led you to. You've been drinking at the streams He found for you. You've been feasting at the table He laid for you. You've been living in the house He prepared for you. And as we find it easy to do, we must never forget the heart of our shepherd. Our shepherd loves to provide for His sheep, but ultimately, His greatest joy is to eat with you. To walk with you. To be with you in times of provision, in times of deep darkness, in times of enemies pressing in, and ultimately, forevermore.

But there is still one more way that our triune God shepherds His people by preparing a table in the midst of our enemies. He does this through the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His disciples that after He ascended to heaven, He would send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. And one of the things that this Comforter would do would be to bring peace and rest and security and courage in the face of great persecution. Luke 12:11-12, Jesus says, "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." And couple this with Philippians 4:7, where the word says, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ." This too is a table. This too is a provision that God gives His people in the presence of their enemies.

You see it on display in Paul and Silas in Acts 16. When they are put in prison in Philippi. And what do we see them doing? Because the Lord has prepared a table for them in the very presence of their enemies, they are singing hymns at midnight. They're praying. They're full of joy. They're full of peace. They're secure. And the prisoners about were listening to them. We see this kind of bold joy and peace in the face of great danger all throughout the accounts of church history. One of my favorites is the record of Polycarp, one of the first Christian martyrs. You can read about his death in Foxe's Book of Martyrs. But Polycarp was a bishop in Smyrna. And he was hunted down by the Roman authorities. And he was brought before them and threatened repeatedly with death in the stadium by wild

beasts and fire.

It's reported that as Polycarp walked into the stadium to face these authorities to be tried by them, a voice came from heaven saying, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." It's also said that just before this, he'd had a dream where the Lord had said, "You'll be burned by fire." These are the Lord's comforts to him. And we see it in his responses that the Christians at that time were called atheists because they didn't believe in the pantheon of Roman gods. And so Polycarp was asked to do two things: to swear by Caesar, to pray to Caesar, and to say, "Away with the atheists." And so Polycarp, in this stadium full of a mob calling for his death, turns and waves his hand at the mob and says, "Away with the atheists."

Where do you get that sort of peace? He keeps being pressed by the Roman consul to swear by Caesar and renounce Jesus Christ. And he says, "Sir, sir, I think you don't understand. See, I am a Christian. And if you want to know what that means, let me know. I can book an appointment with you later." That's literally what he says to him. That's the sort of the peace, the security, the calm. He says, "I'm not going to deny Jesus Christ. You can threaten me with whatever you like. Bring it on. Let me die."

Eventually, they handed down the sentence of burning, and they led Polycarp to the stake. He's 86 years old, I think, at this point. His captors try to bind him to the stake, but he says, "Hey, leave me as I am. For the one who gives me strength to endure the fire will also give me strength to remain at the stake, unmoved, without being secured by nails. I'll stand here. I'll burn for Christ." That is the peace of God that comes when a Christian is comforted by the Holy Spirit. That is the Spirit preparing a table for Polycarp right there in the midst of his enemies. This is what it looks like for a man to look forward with certain hope to the day when he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that You are the shepherd of Your people. Lord, I pray that any here who do not know You as shepherd today would come to You now. I pray that they would see that You are a great and merciful God, a God who is worth serving, a God who offers them peace and rest from their labors, a God who is desirous to provide for all their need. Lord Jesus, we thank you for providing for us in the midst of our enemies. Lord God, we pray that we would know the reality of this time in our lives. That we would look to You. That we would cry out to You. That our deepest desire would be to dwell with You forever. And we pray that You would lead us all the way. In Jesus' name, Amen.