

July 19-23, 2021 Edition

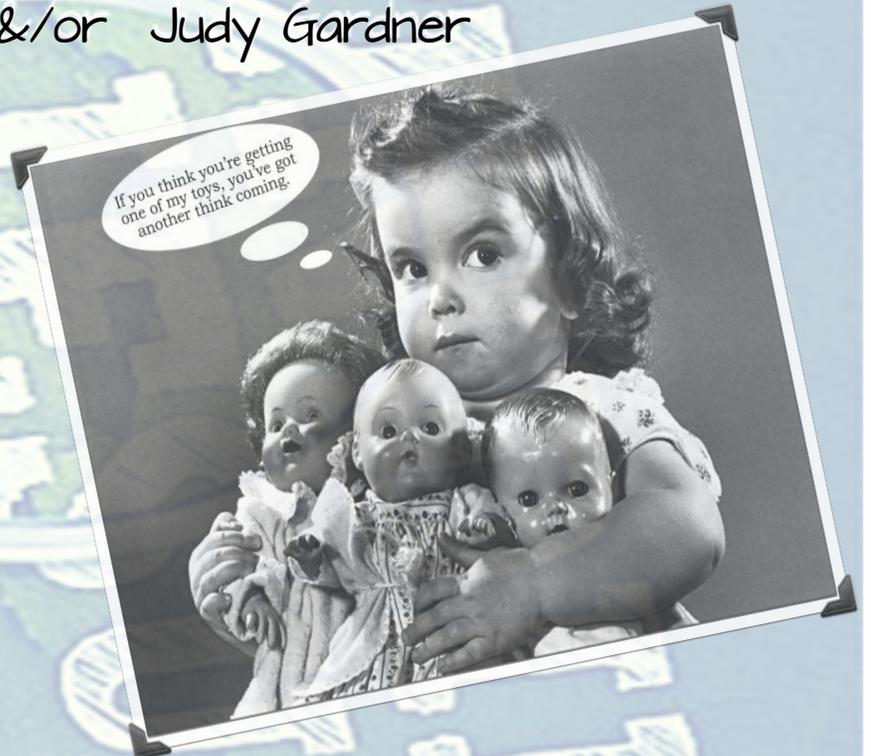
The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #59

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

Greed & Idolatry

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we will be talking about the concept of greed and idolatry- one of the seven deadly sins. Now the 7 deadly sins don't come straight out of the Bible- they were a gathering together of what one guy saw as the worst, most destructive forces in a Christian's life. That guy was a monk named John Cassian and his list of the 7 deadliest vices known to mankind became a part of the church and ultimately western culture (they even made a super creepy detective/crime movie about the 7 deadly sins simply entitled, *Seven*). So the list doesn't come straight out of the Bible although the concept does and I think it's pretty accurate and so we'll use this list as a framework of how not to wreck out lives.

So this week we begin by looking at the sin of greed. One of the main problems with greed is that we don't generally realize we are struggling with it:

Greedy people... don't realize they're headed for poverty. Proverbs 28:22 (NLT)

We don't realize we're struggling with it and maybe worse- it ends up getting us exactly the opposite of what we intended. When the wisdom literature talks about poverty it isn't necessarily talking about a lack of finances. Just like when it talks about death it isn't always talking about a cessation of physical life but a shuffling, zombie-like existence where we aren't truly living but are just existing in a shadow world. Poverty for the Bible can go hand in hand with amazing worldly riches. Greed takes us step by step down a path that leads to that kind of poverty.

Now when we think of greed we almost always think of money, right? I picture Ebenezer Scrooge or Scrooge McDuck counting his money and scheming and worrying about how to hold on to it at all costs. But the Bible doesn't limit greed to anything as simple as money. Sure, money can be our weakness but there are plenty of other ways that we succumb to greed in our lives and it all revolves around the concept of idolatry. We moderns shake our heads and scoff when we hear the word idolatry and don't think we are in danger of breaking the first two commands of God's top 10 do and don't list (the 10 commandments):

You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind... You must not bow down to them or worship them. Exodus 20:3-5 (NLT)

When we think about worshiping idols we picture ancient savages dancing around a fire and bowing to carved heads that represent their "gods". We are much too sophisticated for that, right? We wouldn't even be tempted to break either of the first two commandments, right? But the Bible recognizes that the gods haven't gone away- they've just become sneaky. They now get us to sacrifice the best of our time, energy, resources- even our relationship often time- on the idol of greed:

Don't be greedy, which is the same as worshiping idols. Colossians 3:5 (CEV)

Greed = idolatry according to the Bible. Why? Because idolatry is simply sacrificing to a spiritual power/entity in order to get what we want most. It's an attempt to manipulate spiritual powers to achieve what we most desire. And it will destroy you. I'll say it again, greed/idolatry will destroy your life. Slowly. Over time. Step by step you will descend into a place of foolishness and darkness and death that you will be shocked to find yourself in. You'll have no idea how you even got there. And you will have sacrificed the things that you most

need in order to get the thing you most desired (and often you won't even get the thing you most desired. Tomorrow we'll look more closely at idolatry but today I just wanted to connect greed and idolatry in our minds. Maybe spend today thinking about what idolatry has come to in 21st century Eagle River, Alaska and more important what it might look like in your own life.

Tuesday Reflection: Ok- so let's start off by looking at the ancient concept of idolatry. We established yesterday that greed is the same thing as idolatry. We also established that idolatry breaks the first 2 of the ten commandments. Turns out greed/idolatry is a big deal to God. But why? Because of what it does to us. We were made by God, for God. Read that again. I'll never the first time I heard someone say that (it was Rick Warren and I really had to think about it just to wrap my brain around it and I'm still trying to work out what that means for my life). We'll talk more about that on Thursday but suffice it to say you were designed by God to live in relationship with Him. That relationship is called "worship" and when we live our lives the way we were designed to live them the result is meaning, joy, satisfaction, peace and a sense of tremendous purpose. That's the reasoning behind the first two commandments- not that God is some petty, petulant child that doesn't want you to play with some other god but that you were designed to live in relationship with Him and when we don't our entire existence is shaken at its foundation. It really messes us up and then by extension messes up the lives of those around us. Like I said, more about this on Thursday. But we now realize that greed is the same thing as idolatry based on this verse:

Don't be greedy, which is the same as worshiping idols. Colossians 3:5 (CEV)

But in the ancient world idolatry was a little easier to spot, right? The picture we all get in our heads of rustic ancients dancing around a fire, bowing down to carved "idols" really drives home what idolatry is, doesn't it?



The pictures you just looked at are of Baal, Asherah, Marduk and Dagon. They were the gods of the people who lived all around ancient Israel. The people of that part of the world worshiped these gods and sacrificed to them in order to manipulate them to give the people what they most desired. Think the people of God wouldn't be tempted to worship these gods? Think again. Most of the Old Testament is God sending prophets to warn the people about breaking the first 2 commandments (no other gods but Me and don't make an idol of any kind and don't bow down and worship them) and how the people wouldn't listen and worshiped these idols/gods (and more that aren't pictured in this reflection.

In fact- just a short time after the Ten Commandments were given to Israel spoken by God Himself from the fiery cloud on Mt. Sinai the people of Israel made an idol, bowed down and worshiped it. It was the golden calf picture you can see on the previous page. Why would they do that? Well, the easy answer is that Moses had been called up onto the mountain to receive the tablets that God had made and written out Himself- the famous Ten Commandments (if you're not familiar with the story watch the old Charelton Heston movie titled interestingly enough, The Ten Commandments to get the feel for what's going on here). He had been gone for a while and the people started to doubt he would ever return. So they demanded to create this golden calf to represent God to them.

Why would they do that? Because they wanted to be able to manipulate God and they thought that if they had a statue that represented God they could somehow influence Him to do their bidding. Boy was that a mistake (watch the movie if you don't believe me). And what was the people's reaction to why they had fallen for the temptation of idolatry? Simple- it wasn't my fault! When Aaron explained where the golden calf had come from he told Moses that the people demanded that they do something and so he did but this was the result:

So I told them, "Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off." When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire-and out came this calf!" Exodus 32:24 (NLT)

We ridicule the idea and laugh at Aaron (you done messed up A-A-ron! If you don't get the joke just keep going or google it- it's a Key & Peele reference and if you don't know what a Key & Peele is like I said just keep reading- many of my jokes are pretty obscure. Sorry about that ;o) but we use the same excuses when we are "tricked" into idolatry/greed in our own lives. Tomorrow we'll talk about our "American idols" but for today maybe spend some time thinking about why God would care so much about idolatry and greed in our lives.

Wednesday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about the ancient idols that the people of Israel often were seduced into worshipping and engaging in idolatry and greed (oh yeah- and we also established that idolatry is the same thing as greed). Today I'd like to talk about us. As I mentioned yesterday and Monday, we just don't think we have an idolatry problem, do we? We picture the savages bowing down to crude, carved statues and dismiss the idea that we could ever fall for so ridiculous an idea as idolatry but like I said earlier- the gods haven't gone away, they've just gotten sneaky. They've gone underground so to speak.

The spiritual powers that people worshipped and bowed down are no longer represented by carved statues- it's gotten much more subtle. We now worship what I've heard called, American idols. No, not the TV show (although that is a fascinating name for a show now that I think about it)- the spiritual forces that we all pursue in one form or another even in our modern world. For instance, today millions of people all over our country walked into "temples" and worshiped at the altar of money and wealth. On Wall street in New York city and hundreds of other similar places in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta and Miami people worship every day. How? By sacrificing the best of their time, energy, resources, health and relationships at the altar of the almighty dollar. Now there isn't anything wrong with money. We are encouraged (especially in the wisdom literature) to be good financial stewards and wealth creation is encouraged while cautioning us against greed. But when we make money/

wealth the ultimate prize in our lives things get dark very quickly. We've all seen it in movies, tv shows, books and in our own experiences with the people we know. We know greed destroys but man it's tough to resist it for some of us.

There are many other "American idols" where we sacrifice the best we have on the altar or things like:

-- Money; -- Work; -- Success; -- Power; -- Intelligence;
-- Attractiveness; -- Relationships; -- Pleasure (Addictions);
-- Church/Religiosity; -- Being Right; -- -----;

Let's talk briefly about these shall we? Money we already hit but work is a HUGE American idol. We've all heard about people who sacrificed everything for work and success only to end up losing everything that they claimed and probably truly believed was important to them in the process even if they achieved the level of success they were aiming for. Intelligence is another. Ever known someone that being smart was an idol in their lives? They always had to be right. They would attempt to crush anyone who dared disagree with them then were left shrugging in confusion when all of their relationships were destroyed. Even attractiveness can be an idol for some of us and if that's our idol then we worship at temples called beauty salons and gyms. Even church can become an idol for those of us who want to use the scriptures to manipulate people and gain power and control. We've all seen it- and it's led to some of the most destructive situations in this world made even worse by the fact that the one place that should be offering healing and help for those suffering from the ravages of idolatry/greed in their lives is mired in idolatry and greed itself.

Now again- there's nothing wrong with any of these "American idols" that I mentioned above. They are all good things but when they lose their proper place in our lives (which happens when we lose our proper perspective in life) they become toxic, destructive and dysfunctional and can lead us down the path of foolishness:

(They) have set up idols in their hearts. They have embraced things that will make them fall into sin. Ezekiel 14:3 (NLT)

I didn't really talk about how relationships can become idolatry/greed issues in our lives (which will cause us to fall into sin) but they can and do all the time. We think that relationships should be the highest goal of our lives and we're right- but they need to be properly ordered. Way back in the fourth century there was a monk named Augustine. They named a strain of grass after the guy but that's not where I'm going with this. He was one of the greatest thinkers this world has ever known and he talked a lot about idolatry and greed and he pointed out that idolatry and greed are not simply about loving money or power or success or other people or church or pleasure or anything else. He pointed out these things were more about "disordered loves". After all, we're taught to love each other. But if someone in my life becomes the ultimate reason for my existence- the thing that if I have it exactly the way I imagine it should be then all will be right with the world but if anything is wrong or off about it then I won't be ok until I fix it... Well when someone gets to that point we talk about codependence and relationship become toxic and dysfunctional and destructive. What happened?

Augustine would say it was a matter of disordered loves. We are commanded to love each other but our ultimate love is to be God Himself (remember the first 2 commandments? No other gods before Me and don't make an idol to worship or bow down to? Remember how the Bible makes the connection between idolatry and greed? Ok then we're all caught up here). If God is our ultimate love then not only will our relationships NOT suffer for it- on the contrary they'll flourish as we walk the path of wisdom and love each other the way Jesus would were He here in our place. And the reverse is also true- put anything or anyone in that ultimate spot in our lives that we were designed/created to have only God in and that relationship will turn toxic faster than you can say American idol.

This process is seen most clearly with addictions. Whether we come to mind altering substances because we seek pleasure or are attempting to escape dealing with the thoughts rattling through our brains (due to a number of very real and very troubling things that often happen to people often because of someone else's struggle with idolatry and greed) the results are the same. We value what the substance can offer more than anything at the moment and eventually it makes its way to the place of "god" in our lives. It takes the ultimate spot in our lives that we were designed to live with God Himself alone in. We don't generally think of it in those terms but this is what happens. At first the substance delivers on exactly what it was offering. A chance to get high and enjoy myself or forget what I don't want to be thinking about. If it didn't deliver at first it would never become an idol (or addiction- same thing) to us.

But something strange happens over time. It starts to take more and more to achieve the same level of high in order to produce the same level of fun or forgetfulness/numbness that we are pursuing. And as time goes on the substance stops really giving us the high we enjoyed so at the beginning but if we try to stop we are powerless and miserable both physically and spiritually. What happened? The idol of pleasure or numbness has given less and less and taken more and more until in the end the addict is left with nothing. His/her idol has taken everything. It's extremely obvious in substance abuse/addiction but it works the same way when we make work, money, success, power, intelligence, relationships or even church our idol. Not sure if any of those are an idol to you? That's why I left a blank up there in the list. Think about this today. Do you have an American idol? And if you can't think of one then ask someone close to you if they see an idol in your life. But I will warn you- you might not like what you hear. And our idols don't like to be challenged. Remember- idolatry/greed is sneaky in whatever form it takes. You might not even know you have an issue. More tomorrow.

Thursday:

You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind... You must not bow down to them or worship them. Exodus 20:3-5 (NLT)

The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)

Reflection: In the ancient world the gods had no agenda for human beings other than getting whatever they could out of the humans. The gods demanded to be served and if they were served then really they could care less how the humans treated one another.

Into this setting comes the God of Israel. He brings the nation of Israel out of Egypt and gives them the 10 commandments. Two of those commandments revolve around man's relationship to God. No other God than Me... and don't make idols. At first blush it seems like the God of Israel is no different than the other gods. He wants them only to worship Him and it might seem like He's a petulant, pouting little kid who stomps his feet when he doesn't get his way. It might seem like that until you start to dig into what it is that God wants from His people.

What God wants it turned out is what we now refer to as "ethical monotheism". It was unheard of in the ancient world. It turned out this God cared about how the people treated one another. It turned out that this God had created the people to live in community with Him and with each other and only in that climate would the people discover what their purpose on earth was.

When we sacrifice the best that we have of our time, energy, resources, relationship, etc. to any kind of modern, American idol (money, work/success, power, pleasure, toxic relationships, etc.) we become blinded to the real reason we were put on this earth. We keep thinking that surely we'll find that purpose and feel that meaning and satisfaction that we all crave (have you ever wondered why you crave that stuff?) if I just work a little harder or spend a little more on (fill in the blank... what's your American idol?).

But time after time people climb to the top of whatever mountain they believe will bring them the satisfaction they crave only to find that the idol that was so alluring is empty. And the things that matter the most (connection with God and each other) have been neglected to the point that we can't resuscitate them. An idol will cause you to miss out on what life is really all about... because I was made to worship love and follow in the ways of this God, and idolatry will cause me, will cause you, to miss out on the purpose for which you were created. You will live your whole life and never discover what it means to be who you were created to be. That's part of why the Bible makes such a big deal about the tragic results of idolatry.

Don't be fooled. Ask God to open your eyes now instead of later when it might be too late. Don't miss what you were created for.

Prayer: Father, I know You care about how I treat other people. Give me whatever I'm going to need to do what is right, love mercy and walk humbly with You. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Friday:

The Teacher says, "Useless! Useless! Completely useless! Everything is useless." What do people really gain from all the hard work they do here on earth?

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 (NCV)

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28 (NLT)

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. Jonah 2:8 (NIV)

Reflection: Have you ever heard the word, shalom? It's a Jewish word that is translated in our Bibles as "peace". But there is so much more behind that word. The true meaning of

“shalom” is an overall sense of things being the way they are supposed to be. People in our world bemoan the state of the world these days. We look around and see a world that even our culture says just isn’t right... isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. But where do we get our sense of how things are supposed to be? If there is no ultimate authority... no creator that serves as the standard for who things are supposed to be then where do we get the notion that there is a way things are supposed to be?

The Bible says there is a standard. That standard is set by our creator. And when that standard is lived up to the natural result is shalom. Shalom. Just saying the word makes me feel better.

When Judy and I had just started dating WAYYYY back in 1987 I came up to Alaska during Christmas break to meet her family and hang out in the great white north. We went to a little gift shop in the Sears Mall that had all these little nifty doodads. I remember seeing one particularly nifty doodad and feeling very excited because I could recognize it for what it was when I was pretty sure nobody else really knew what they were looking at. This is what I saw:



As a student of Biblical languages I felt quite proud of myself that I recognized a Hebrew word... however, my sense of pride went up several points because I was able to point out to the shop keeper and the people I was with (Judy, Jeanne & Jack... my future mother in law and step dad in law) that while the carving was beautiful it was backwards (sheesh... second year seminary students can be SOOOO full of themselves, can't we? Hope I'm not like that anymore ;o).

Hebrew writing is backwards... at least it seems backwards to us. We read from left to right... Hebrew is read from right to left. So this is what the word, shalom, should look like:



As I sit here almost 30 years later and look at this carving that somehow miraculously showed up under the christmas tree at Judy's mom's house that Christmas... my first gift from my future mother in law and step dad in law (how did they know what I wanted???) I'm struck by the fact that God's concepts are often perceived to be backwards, right? The way to shalom seems so simple in our own minds. Just give me all things I think I need and I'll have peace... everything will be the way it's supposed to be. But it rarely works that way, does it? In fact... more often than not the things I think I need to have shalom in my life turn out to be exactly the opposite of what I thought.

That's the problem with idolatry. The idols in our lives (and we all have different idols but they all offer the same thing... shalom, peace, satisfaction, etc.) claim to offer what we believe we need but in the end they are empty.

An idol cannot give you what you need most.

In fact... it will give you what you need the least. It will rob you of shalom while promising that if you work just a little harder and give it a little more time it will finally deliver on the promise that you've bought in to. There is only one commandment in idolatry... only one demand from the things that promise us shalom. Do you know what it is?

Thou Shalt Perform.

As soon as you falter in the slightest with your idol your dreams will become nightmares. If having more money is your idol then if someone has more than you it will eat at you day and night. If being attractive is your idol then as the ravages of time take their toll you will be devastated. If power is your idol than seeing someone with more power will eat at you. If being smart is your idol then what happens when you come across someone who is obviously smarter than you are?

Idolatry cannot give you what you need the most. It can't give you shalom. No idol ever said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Do you know Who said that? Jesus. Only He can offer you what you need most. If you're back is breaking and you ache all over and you're miserable maybe you've been trying to perform too much. You've taken the weight of the world on your own shoulders and contrary to what you and I often believe our backs weren't made to handle that kind of weight. But with Jesus by your side, shouldering the lion's share of your burdens shalom is the natural result. And there's no substitute for shalom. Does it seem like a backwards way of getting what we need most? Sure. That's why so many of us miss this. That's why so many of us are miserable. How about you? What will you choose?

Prayer:

Father, forgive me for the times I've tried to shoulder my burdens on my own. Forgive me for the times I've forged ahead on my own and tried to find shalom in my own way. Today I ask You to step in and show me how a backwards life in the eyes of the world can lead to the kind of life I was truly born to live. In Jesus Name, amen.

Saturday:

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do. James 1:5-8 (NLT)

Reflection: I don't know about you, but I kinda like to keep my options open. More choices usually seems more better (maybe not grammatically correct but I left it that way to get your attention). But for all the things I find it best to hold on to loosely, there's one thing I'm

learning to cling to. I have learned that the best foundation is worth betting 100% on. It's not that my mind never asks the question, "What if God's way isn't the best way?" It's that I've learned to believe my beliefs and doubt my doubts.

That's such an important concept for me I'm going to say it again... because maybe it'll be important for you too:

I've learned to believe my beliefs and doubt my doubts.

I've chosen to bet on God as the most solid foundation. Contradicting and contrary thoughts may roll across my mind like waves, but I'm learning not to pull up my anchor to make sure it's big enough to hold me steady. I make it my goal to practice my faith, to actively invest in my faith. I don't always have as much faith as I wish I had, but I try to bet it all on that One Truth that I believe can be trusted to endure.

I'm so glad that the passage we just read in James is written to Christians. To me that means that I'm not expected to be masterful even at faith. I can rely on the Master's grace to be enough for me. He is faithful to me even when my thoughts and feelings fail me - when I let my focus get diffused, when I listen to the critics rather than my Father, when I get distracted by my human biases and God's wisdom is completely obscured.

God wants us to ask for wisdom and to seek His help. He has the patience of the long-sighted parent who recognizes that it's when a child insists on doing it his own way and fails, that the wisdom of the parent is most clearly revealed. We want to learn from our errors in human judgment. We want to push forward. We want fewer and fewer episodes of being blown about til we're disoriented and seasick. But we don't have to worry. The storms may take us off course from time to time, but we aren't betting on our own navigational equipment. We're betting on love.

You and I may be mistaken 9 times out of 10 when we try to get a clear view of reality. This last week my body was fighting some kind of bug. It never laid me out, but I did notice that my system was easily depleted. Sometimes when I looked at things in the distance, I'd see two of them. My brain wasn't as reliable at perceiving images as usual. My double vision would always clear as things got closer, but I had that feeling of discomfort that comes from not being able to completely trust what I was seeing.

Life is like that and that's why we all need the Master Architect to guide us. God's wisdom is often obscured by our amateur vision. But that's okay. Someday we will see things as they truly are. When that day comes there will be no double vision, no second guessing. All of our vistas will be beautiful almost beyond what we can bear. A heavenly reality is coming. For now we work with imperfect maps that need to be continually updated. For now we live without certainty and place our bets the best we can. For now we practice faith - and Jesus assures us that as His students, our artwork gets accepted on God's big fridge, even if our perspectives are consistently a little (or a LOT) off.

Prayer: Father, thank You that You don't expect me to be better than I am. Thank You for forgiving me when I fail. Thank You that You love me. In Jesus' Name, amen.