

Christ's Prophecy Regarding the Great Tribulation

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Bible Text: Matthew 24:21-22
Preached on: Sunday, November 8, 2020

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The scripture reading for this afternoon will be Matthew 24:1-22 and also 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. So Matthew 24:1-22 first.

1 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. 2 And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. 3 And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? 4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. 5 For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. 6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. 8 All these are the beginning of sorrows. 9 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. 11 And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. 12 And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. 13 But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. 15 When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) 16 Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains: 17 Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: 18 Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. 19 And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! 20 But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: 21 For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

22 And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

Now turn with me to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. There the Apostle Paul writes,

1 Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, 2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; 4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. 5 Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? 6 And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. 8 And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: 9 Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, 10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 11 And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: 12 That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

The text for the sermon this afternoon is taken from Matthew 24:21 and 22. There it says,

21 For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. 22 And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

Our text is taken from a well-known chapter, Matthew 24, which deals with the signs of the times, and one of those signs is, if not the most important one, is that of the great tribulation.

It says, "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be." The Lord Jesus here is predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. When the Roman legions would surround the holy city with their banners displaying the image of the emperor, this would be to the Jews a great abomination. The word is used also by Daniel and it has the same thing, the enmity displayed by the pagan world against Judah and Israel and against the church, was always considered to be a great abomination that would make desolate everything that was sacred to them. When the Romans came to take the city of Jerusalem and also destroy its temple, they arrived there with banners flying, and on those banners were

engraved the images of the emperor and that, of course, was sacrilege in the eyes of the Jews and rightly so. But for the Christians, it would be another type of sign and signal, it would be the sign to get out of Jerusalem and to escape the doom that would come upon the Jewish nation.

The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple was preceded by a terrible period of suffering for the Jews, a tribulation that was unprecedented in their history, and one on which would not have its equal in the future. Not even the extermination of 6 million Jews under Hitler's regime has been worse than that which took place in the year 70 AD. As one Bible commentator, Loraine Boettner, said, "Considering the physical, moral and religious aspects, suffering never reached a greater degree of awfulness and intensity than in the siege of Jerusalem. Add to that the bestiality of Jew-to-Jew and the anguish of a people who knew they were forsaken by God, and we see the justification of Christ's statement that there never has been nor ever will be anything quite as terrible as Jerusalem's destruction." Yet the question we must ask is whether Jesus in speaking about the great tribulation refers only and exclusively to the destruction of Jerusalem or does he also point to yet another period of tribulation before his Second Coming will arrive? There is much disagreement among Bible students on this question. Some would limit Christ's discourse to the great tribulation, the fall of Jerusalem; others see these statements as primarily prophetic of the end time. Well, we will try to sort this out for you this afternoon as I speak to you about "Christ's Prophecy Regarding the Great Tribulation." Three points here. First of all, the conflated reference to this event, and I will explain that word "conflated" in a moment. Secondly, the multiple manifestations of this event. And thirdly, the limited duration of this event.

Congregation, what the Lord Jesus is doing here is talking about two events separated by many centuries but treating them as if they were one. What he does here is he conflates matters concerning the destruction of Jerusalem with matters which concern the end of the world, and he does that in such a way that it is difficult to determine whether he is referring to the one or to the other, or perhaps to both. To conflate something means to put different things together as if they were the same but they are not really the same. There is a difference. The method that Jesus uses here throughout the Olivet Discourse and indeed in many other passages as well, is that of prophetic foreshortening, that is, a method whereby events that are far removed in time and events in the near future are spoken of as if they were very close together. It's like looking at a distant mountain range, peaks which are many miles apart seem to be very close together. Travelers often think of that when they are into mountain regions and they think that the mountain peaks that they see in the distance are really close together but they are not. Once they come to the first mountain peak, then they notice deep valleys between the next one, and so it is here. Only as you come closer to other peaks and mountain ranges, we will see that they are separated at quite a large distance.

Well, it is that way here also. Jesus in predicting the catastrophe of AD 70 wants us to see it as a type of the tribulation at the end of the world. Or putting it still differently, in describing the brief period of the great tribulation at the close of history, Jesus is painting in colors borrowed from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. We are to look,

then, for a yet future tribulation which will immediately precede the Second Coming of our Lord.

When will that tribulation come and are there any indications that it is indeed near at hand? Let me first explain what that word means, tribulation. Tribulation comes from a Latin word which is taken from agriculture. It refers to a farmer's implement which he employs for separating the husks from the corn by a rigorous process known as tribulatio in Latin. We can translate it as a pressing together. We can also use the word affliction or anguish and trouble. All of these words are covered by that term tribulation. And so what the Lord Jesus is telling us here is that there is coming a time of great anguish, great suffering, unusually severe, and therefore we have to know what is meant by this and what we can expect that is coming.

In a sense, of course, we can say that the whole period between Christ's First and his Second Coming may be called a period of tribulation. Jesus speaks of this in verses 9 and 10 of this chapter when he says, "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended," etc. etc.

Now there have been many periods in church history when persecution was very very prevalent. All through the centuries, really, of the Christian era there has been persecution, nevertheless, these persecutions have until the end always been local, never universal. But now Christ here is predicting of the coming of a time when there will be a brief but yet terrible tribulation of a worldwide nature covering the whole globe, you might say. And congregation, there are signs that this great tribulation is indeed near at hand. In many countries today, as you all know, there is persecution of Christians again, especially where believers live under anti-Christian governments. This is the case in Communist countries and also Muslim countries, as well as countries in Africa where also Muslims are gaining the ascendancy like Uganda and Nigeria. Terrible killings are taking place even as I speak.

William Hendriksen, a well-known commentator who wrote many good solid commentaries, he says that the great tribulation need not cover the entire world at the same time but may already be experienced by Christians in certain countries today. But now he wrote this commentary quite a few years ago and we have to update him on this. It is now being a problem for many many countries. These things are happening today. The news media don't report it as they should, especially the liberal news media. They don't like to talk too much about Christians and the hard times they are going through, but if you read magazines devoted to this subject, then you will notice that it is a huge problem. And therefore these things should make us think since we are living in a country where we still have quite a bit of freedom, freedom of assembly. Don't think of this COVID issue as being so serious, it is bad but it is not nearly what it is in countries where people cannot go to church at all. We should think about that, though, as something that is coming also to us, and who knows how soon it is. And then we must ask ourselves the question: will my faith be strong enough to stand up to this tribulation when it comes also to us?

But it is not only persecution that is involved in tribulation, it's not the only sign of which we may conclude that the great tribulation is near or has come, there are several other signs. The first one I want to mention in this connection is the great apostasy. According to Christ, there is going to be a great falling away from the faith before he will return. In verses 10 through 12, he says, "And then shall many be offended," the Greek uses the word scandalized, and the result will be that they will fall away. They were Christians at one time or professed to be Christians but they shall fall away, they "shall betray one another, and shall hate one another," etc.

Apostasy, however, is not restricted to the end time. Most of Israel's history was characterized by apostasy, in fact, it was because of their terrible apostasies, plural, that both the northern and the southern kingdom were deported, taken into exile. But also in the New Testament there soon came apostasy. The author to the Hebrews speaks of people living at that time who were falling away from the gospel. They were spurning the Son of God. They were counting his blood an unholy thing. And the Apostle John's comment is well-known when he says in his first epistle, "They went out from us because they were not of us." And Paul speaks also of some who will depart from the faith in these latter days. But as I just said, the last days cover not only a certain period in history but it covers the entire period between Christ's First and Second Coming, in varying degrees but there has always been apostasy.

So most of the references in the New Testament to apostasy have to do with events which were happening then as well as after the death of the apostles. There is, however, one passage in the New Testament which points unambiguously to a final apostasy which will occur just before Christ's return and that is what we find in 2 Thessalonians, the passage that we read. In that passage, the Apostle Paul says, "we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come first a falling away, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God." What is happening here is that the Thessalonians, they were eagerly awaiting the return of Christ, in fact, they thought that his coming was imminent, at any moment he would be there, they thought. So they did not think it was necessary to go about their daily tasks anymore. They quit their jobs. Why work if Christ will appear so soon? But Paul did not agree with them at all. He told them that Christ would not come that soon, first certain things would have to happen, and one of them being the great apostasy, and the other the appearance of the son of sin, the man of sin or lawlessness.

Now in our King James version it says "a falling away," but in the original it says "the falling away." So not merely one of many fallings away, but the one, the important one. The apostasy. And this great final falling away, however, will be an intensification and culmination of a rebellion which had already begun at Paul's time for he says in verse 7, "the mystery of iniquity doth already work." The fact that there will be a falling away

implies that it will be a rebellion against the Christian faith as it has been known and professed. Those who will fall away, in other words, those who will be at least outwardly associated with God's people, they will fall away. The great apostasy will occur within the ranks of the members of the visible church and so when we talk about tribulation and about apostasy, then we should be clear that the reference is not necessarily, or not at all really to the pagan world which never professed faith in Christ.

We often talk about the great immorality that is upon us in the world, in our society, but in most cases it is people who at one time were members of the church who are now throwing that all overboard. What is happening in our country and certainly in the United States is that many denominations contain many members that have and still are falling away. There are denominations that contain hundreds of thousands of members but even those that have not yet fallen away, they are on their way of doing so by going along with the views of the secular world, and especially in the area of sexuality. You all know what is being discussed lately or in the last few years when they talk about homosexuals and same-sex marriages and gender confusion and people choosing when the boy wants to be a girl, and a girl wants to be a boy, parents may not interfere with that. That is becoming very important as an issue that divides people in the church. Our churches are not yet afflicted by that, at least not to my knowledge, but it could happen. It could happen soon. It is happening in many denominations.

And so the great apostasy is upon us. It does not require much spiritual discernment to realize that we are in the midst of the great tribulation. All the so-called Christian nations of the West are in open revolt against all Christian truths and values. Our society by and large hates Christians. Why? Well, because Christians believe the Bible and the Bible teaches there is a God who has a law, the 10 Commandments, and that he enforces that law, he demands obedience to that law. And just to stay with this whole area of sexuality, what is happening today is that the enemies of the truth, they are overturning completely the creation order, God's teaching on the family and marriage and sexual issues. That is so against the natural man and his thinking that he does not want to have even God, if he exists, even God should not judge and should demand obedience to his commandments. And therefore Christians who believe in God, they are hated because they are trying to tell people how to live, and if anything is characteristic of this age, it is that everyone wants to do what is right in his or her own eyes.

And so if now and then people in our society keep up the appearance of religion using sometimes religious phrases, they still deny the power that comes with the gospel. They deny the power thereof, Paul says. They profess faith in God's word maybe outwardly but they don't want to live according to that word. The evidence is there. There are still many people in our country and also in the United States and in the West generally, who profess faith in God but their lifestyle is such that they might as well say, "We don't believe in God." It is theoretical atheism that characterizes many people, but they go beyond theory but they go also into practice. And so whatever people may claim to believe in, it has no substance.

And now I'm so worried personally and I may not even want to share that in the pulpit, but I am so worried about what's going to happen in America with the new government, not that the old one was so good but at least the government that is now likely to stop and be rejected and replaced by another one, that they still made decisions that were favorable to the church such as abortion, anti-abortion was a very powerful factor in the life of the former government, and what is going to happen now? There is every indication that the desires of many of the Democrats is that they will go much beyond what they have been able to accomplish until this point. We need much prayer that this may not happen. We may think that we are much better off here in Canada but what is really true of Canada is that they are like Europe. America until fairly recently was holding out and being still influenced by the older traditions based on scripture, but these things are fast disappearing.

Now it talks here in Thessalonians also about the great apostasy revealing a mysterious person and that is the man of sin. And who is this man of sin also known as the antichrist? All kinds of answers have been given to this question. Some say it is Satan, others think that he is the beast out of the sea as reported in Revelation 13. Many people refuse to think of one definite person, that they see him as many persons called collectively the man of sin. But some speak of the time of the Roman emperors such as Nero, that he was the antichrist at that time. Well, what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians and also from Daniel 7, it becomes quite clear that the antichrist will be one definite person living at the end time, a man in whom rebellion against God's law will be, as it were, embodied, contained. He will be the great opponent, the terrible adversary of God and of his people. He will sit enthroned in the temple of God. He will claim to be God and he will demand men to worship him alone.

Now Paul says that this man of sin has not yet been revealed. Why not? Well, something is holding him back. It seems that Paul views the man who is holding him back as a restrainer who is both a thing and a person. In verse 6 he speaks of that which withholds, but in verse 7 he says he who now lets or restrains. Paul is thinking here of a person or a movement that will still keep the enemy more or less at bay. It is for the time being thought that the worst things that could happen have not happened yet, and that's because there is still the law that most people want to follow. Law and order. That is the thing that so far is holding back the worst thing that could happen, namely the arrival of the antichrist. Now what Paul is thinking here may be that there will be some ruler, some emperor or king who by enforcing the law keeps the lawless one at bay either consciously or unconsciously, and so it is not until law and order will be completely removed that the antichrist will appear on the stage of history. And what do we see happening in our time? What have we seen lately in the big cities in the United States with the issue of Black Lives Matter which was supposed to be a peaceful thing and maybe some were peaceful, but many were not and they started to burn down buildings and destroy automobiles, attacking police forces and so on? In other words, they were anarchists doing away with the law of the land.

And so these are signs of what is coming. When the mayors of the city or the governors and the police force were not allowed to stop the violence, that's a very serious thing

because that makes matters only worse and that encourages people to continue being against the law and to do what they want. But we should look at these things biblically and based on what Paul says here, is that there is still law and order, if it were completely gone then it would be chaos, but we are on the way to chaos.

The coming of this great adversary of Christ will be attended by great miracles and deluding the masses who are on their way to perdition. His followers are described by Paul as those who perish because they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved. The gospel should be preached with a prayer that the Holy Spirit may apply it that sinners may be saved, and one evidence of salvation is that you will love the truth. But who loves the truth nowadays? And the masses who reject the truth do so, and now I come to a point that is very difficult to follow, but the deepest reason why people at large and in general reject the gospel is that they live under a spirit of delusion. What does that mean? Paul says God shall send them strong delusion that they should believe a lie with the purpose that they all might be damned who believe not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. I don't need to remind you, congregation, that we see this spirit of delusion at work in our generation. People will believe anything except the truth of God's word. They will dabble in astrology, follow weird cults, worship the devil himself, but the gospel of Christ they reject with disgust. Why is that so? How can this be so? Well, congregation, God has hardened their hearts. They are under a strong delusion. Like a man who is under the intoxicating influence of alcohol or drugs, so these people are controlled by lying spirits from the pit.

When it says that God sends this delusion, we should see this as a judicial hardening or giving over to their own wickedness. In Romans 1, Paul talks about that too when he says people are so corrupt, they are so sinful, they've gone so far and so long in the rejection of the word of God and of his law that God gives them over, that he gives them up, that he surrenders them to their own wicked desires so that they arrive at a point in their life where repentance is no longer possible. That's a terrible thing to think of but that's what's happening. There are many people today who are so far gone that talking to them doesn't help at all. They won't listen to you. And cases that we cannot know for sure, of course, we may never assume that we are talking to a person who God has given up, but they may well be among those who can no longer be saved, so hardened they are in their sins.

Judicial hardening or giving over to man's own wickedness is a process and that is what happens. God will first warn those sinners and he will first urge people to accept the gospel of salvation, but when they reject that offer of grace repeatedly in spite of the warnings and the threats, if they spurn God's call to believe, well, then and not until then he hardens them in order that those who were not willing to repent or even ask for the grace of repentance now no longer will be able to do so. Instead of believing the truth of God, they now must and will believe the lie of Satan.

What a terrible judgment. Instead of believing the truth of God, they now must believe the lie of Satan. May that judgment never fall on any of us, congregation, but at the same time we must not take for granted that this will never happen to any of us. What I'm saying here is it is very dangerous to be and to remain unconverted for this always goes

from bad to worse. Every sermon if it fails to bring you closer to God, leads you farther away from him until at last you become gospel-hardened. And congregation, Satan is working overtime seeking to bring us to that point, the point of no return. Every day you, I don't know who you are and I'm not pointing to anyone in particular, but in general it is true every day you remain unconverted is a victory for Satan, and the only way to escape that judgment of being under delusion is that you cry out to God for the saving operations of his Holy Spirit. As long as you still desire to do that, then there is still hope. As long as you go home and go on your knees and beg the Lord to have mercy on you, there certainly is hope because that is a sign, a token that the Lord has not yet given up on you because it is still the day of grace for you.

The great tribulation, congregation, is upon us and we are all warned to take it very seriously for ourselves and for others in our families, among our friends, who may profess the true religion but who don't live according to that religion. But for believers in God and in Christ, there is hope. Why do I say that? Well, because our text, and here I come to my third point, it says except those days, verse 22, "except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened." The great tribulation will be awful but it will not be everlasting.

A good example of that is what we find in the book of Revelation. There we read in one of the seven churches, namely Smyrna, that in chapter 2 there of Revelation, he says, "And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation," so you have that word again, tribulation, "and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days." Ten days, is that to be taken literally? No. It could even be 10 years but it means 10 years that there is a definite beginning and end of that period and symbolically that is expressed here with 10 days. It will not last forever. But it says here, "be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

What I've said this afternoon sounds very distressing, and it is distressing, and I'm sure that there are many people here who think, "How will I do in those days when that happens? Will I have faith enough to stand up for the truth?" Maybe you are experiencing that already at work where you hear people swear and curse and use obscene language and you know that it is wrong and you know what they think of Christians, they look down on them and you are afraid to speak up. You confess that to the Lord and you pray for courage but it never seems to come. But it does mean here that those who are faithful to the word will also receive the spirit of courage. They will also be enabled by the Holy Spirit to speak up when it is necessary. If it has not happened to you yet, keep on praying to the Lord. It is difficult for all of us and it was difficult for those people too, but among these people in Smyrna who stood up for the truth of God, what Polycarp, the church father Polycarp did when he was arrested because he did not want to honor the emperor by putting fragrance on the altar to dedicate it to the emperor, then they said, "Well, either you do that or you will die." And so he said, "I'm not going to deny my Master, the

one who has loved me and who has saved me. Should I go against him? Should I betray him?" And so the authorities, they said, "Well, then you have to die." And he was burned to death but that was only because he had the courage, not coming from himself, he was no more willing to die than anyone else but the Lord gave him and many others the Holy Spirit and his power to be faithful to the end.

And so for all God's people, these things that I have mentioned should have a sobering effect, these warnings against apostasy should be taken seriously even though it is true that the elect of God cannot fall away. But how do you know whether you belong to them? Only by praying to God and by persevering in prayer and trying to live according to the word of God, and that means, as the Apostle Peter says, that you must make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things, Peter says, you shall never fall.

May God help us all to prepare for those days that are coming upon us. Let us train also our children to know the word of God, to stay with that word, to walk in God's ways. It is the only way in which true happiness can be found and experienced. By God's grace. Amen.

Lord, we thank thee for thy word, that it could be preached today and, Lord, especially this afternoon. The message was very solemn because thou, Lord Jesus, art also solemn in thy preaching and teaching. It is often full of comfort and encouragement but there are also warnings that we prepare for the times in which we now live and which may get worse and worse, more difficult to be Christians today. But we also heard, Lord, that no matter what happens to us in our personal lives and as churches corporately as Christianity is being hated, there are also times when thou dost encourage thy people and that thou wilt even help them to be loyal to thy truth. And for those moments, Lord, we pray that they may increase, that we may certainly not go the way of the world and give in to all the false teachings that are being proclaimed from many pulpits today in many churches who are already giving in to the temptation, that the world has practiced for years already that man can live as he wants to, he can marry a wife but he can also marry a member of his own sex, and that is considered to be normal, and many churches are going that way as well. Lord, keep us from that. We are very thankful that, Lord, in our denomination there is unity on that aspect also, and we pray that we may continue to be faithful to thy word, to the creation order that has been revealed so clearly in the book of Genesis, but also throughout scripture. The teachings are always against the natural man and his ideas and we have to be won over to love thy word, thy law, for it is good and wholesome and is intended to make us happy in Christ. Lord, remember this congregation, the leadership, the pastor who is now in British Columbia, but wilt thou bring him safely home again and bless his labors here. Remember also the Sunday school and catechism classes which will meet after this service and may there also thy word be explained to our youth so that they may love that truth and come to know thee, Lord Jesus, as their Savior and as their Lord. Remember us now as we go from here into the week. Bless our labors, our daily labors, and may we receive strength to do our work and to walk in thy ways. We ask it all with the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus' name. Amen.