

God Battles for His People

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Date: 04 September 2016

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[0 : 00] Please do turn to your Bibles and we'll be reading from the book of Joshua and you'll find that on page 181. Joshua chapter 5 and we'll be reading from verse 13 through to chapter 6.

Joshua chapter 5 verse 13 page 181. Now this is one of those well-known stories in the Bible about the fall of Jericho.

And in a book called The Art of Biblical Warfare, the writer lists five ways to capture a walled city. You can go over the wall, under the wall, through the walls, surround the city and starve out the inhabitants or use some sort of trickery like a Trojan horse.

Now it's interesting to know which of those strategies is used as Joshua tackles Jericho. It may not fit any of those categories, but let's have a read. Joshua chapter 5 and verse 13.

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked. And behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand.

[1 : 21] And Joshua went to him and said to him, Are you for us or for our adversaries? And he said, No, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord.

Now I have come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped and said, What does my Lord say to his servants? And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.

And Joshua did so. Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out and none came in.

And the Lord said to Joshua, See, I have given Jericho into your hand with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march round the city, all the men of war going round this city once.

Thus you shall do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark. On the seventh day, you shall march around the city seven times.

[2 : 36] And the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout.

And the wall of the city will fall down flat. And the people shall go up, everyone straight before him.

So Joshua, the son of Nun, called the priests and said to them, Take up the ark of the covenant and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord.

And he said to the people, Go forward, march around the city and let the armed men pass on before the ark of the Lord. And just as Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns before the Lord went forward, blowing the trumpets with the ark of the covenant of the Lord following them.

The armed men were walking before the priests who were blowing the trumpets, and the rear guard was walking after the ark while the trumpets blew continually. But Joshua commanded the people, You shall not shout or make your voice heard, neither shall any word go out of your mouth until the day I tell you to shout.

Then you shall shout. So he caused the ark of the Lord to circle the city, going about it once. And they came into the camp and spent the night in the camp.

[4 : 02] Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord, and the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord walked on. And they blew the trumpets continually, and the armed men were working before them, and the rear guard was walking after the ark of the Lord while the trumpets blew continually.

And the second day they marched around the city once, and returned into the camp. So they did for six days. On the seventh day they rose early at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times.

It was only on the day they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpet, Joshua said to the people, Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab, the prostitute, and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent.

But you keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest, when you have devoted them, you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction, and bring trouble upon it.

[5 : 23] But all silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron are holy to the Lord. They shall go into the treasury of the Lord. So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown.

As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city.

Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys with the edge of the sword.

But to the two men who had spied up the land, Joshua said, go into the prostitute's house, and bring out from there the woman and all who belonged to her, as you swore to her.

So the young men, who had been spies, went in and brought out Rahab, and her father, and mother, and brothers, and all who belonged to her. And they brought out all her relatives, and put them outside the camp of Israel.

[6 : 34] And they burned the city with fire, and everything in it. Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord.

But Rahab, the prostitute, and her father's household, and all who belonged to her, Joshua, saved, alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers, whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua laid an oath on them at the time, saying, curse before the Lord, be the man who raises up, and rebuilds this city, Jericho. At the cost of his firstborn, shall he lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest son, shall he set up its gates.

So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame, was in all the lands. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. It would be very helpful if you had Joshua chapter 6, open in front of you. I think it's page 181. So I do have that open there. Now this is a passage, all about conquest, and warfare.

[8 : 06] Although rather strangely, not all that much fighting goes on, at least in a conventional sense. A very short part of this is given over to actual drawn swords.

It's a chapter all about warfare. City is defeated, wiped off the map, and Joshua and his army are victorious in the end. Now as we've been thinking about in the book of Nehemiah over the last few weeks, there is an ongoing battle for the redemption of man, and for the establishment of his kingdom on this earth.

And it's a battle that has raged from the very beginning, the first pages of the Bible. And that battle is ongoing. Despite the fatal blow having already been struck, it was dealt by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

And Christians today are involved in that same conflict as we await the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although the battles that we face are of a different order than the battles that Joshua and his army had to fight.

Now I think there are two dangers when it comes to thinking about applying this sort of passage to Christians today. Firstly, one is to think that there is no battle at all.

[9 : 29] And the other danger to think that there is a battle. But we might be on the losing side. This wonderful and astonishing passage guards against those two errors.

There is a battle. That much is clear. And it's not just the one-off battle here in Canaan against the city of Jericho. But it is the battle, the warfare that has raged through all history between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

That is the battle that has raged. There is a battle. But let's not make the mistake of thinking that we are on the losing side. For all who are united to Christ, for all who fall upon the promises of God, there is great reassurance for you, for all of us, you are on the winning side.

But there is also terrifying warning in this passage. This battle was an act of judgment on a deeply idolatrous and sinful nation.

And as we know, there is a much bigger, far more terrifying judgment to come for all people. And for those who are unrepentant, that will be a terrible day.

[10:50] So this is a tremendously encouraging passage for God's people. There is a battle, but you're on the winning side. Well, there's the big picture.

Let's zoom in now on Joshua chapter 6. It's a remarkable passage, a hugely encouraging passage, because we see here in the clearest possible terms that the Lord, and he alone, wins the battle over his enemies and gives his people the victory.

So three points this evening. Firstly, the Lord fights and wins the battle for his people. The Lord fights and wins the battle for his people. Now this is not an ordinary sort of battle.

As I've already said, there's barely any fighting at all. The only actual face-to-face combat that's recorded, the only physical drawing of swords, gets the briefest of mentions there in chapter 6, verse 21.

It is very clear indeed that this is a battle fought not by the Israelites, not by Joshua's army, but by the Lord.

[12:02] This is yet another astonishing, supernatural act of supreme power by Israel's God, the Lord of the heavens above and of the earth beneath. And as the writer is at pains to present, this is not a battle fought by Joshua, but it's fought by the Lord.

Notice four things in particular are mentioned which point to this fact that it is the Lord that fights, not Joshua. Firstly, the commander of the Lord's army. Secondly, the city of Jericho itself. Thirdly, the prominence of the Ark of the Covenant. And fourthly, the slightly unorthodox nature of the battle. So those four things point to the fact that this is the Lord's victory.

So number one, the command of the Lord's army. Have a look at the end of chapter five. It's quite an extraordinary encounter between Joshua and the command of the Lord's army.

And one that would have been deeply and hugely encouraging to Joshua. They were not alone in the battle. And in fact, there was a heavenly army on hand with sword drawn.

[13:10] But notice, it's not so much that the command of the Lord's army is on Israel's side. Look at how he answers Joshua's question. Are you for us or for our adversaries?

And he replies, no. But I am the commander of the Lord's army. Now I have come. He's saying, I'm not on your side, but rather you're on mine.

What's an encouragement to Joshua and all Israel with the presence of the command of the Lord's army. The armies of Canaan would prove powerless before them. God wanted Joshua to know that he was not alone.

That success was certain. This was a battle fought by the Lord. Secondly, the city of Jericho itself. Chapter 6, verse 1. It is an impenetrable fortress. It was shut up inside and outside. This was a walled city in lockdown mode.

[14:15] Ultimate defense zone. It was not going to be from a human point of view an easy city to lay siege to. Especially for a relatively untested army. This army had fought two battles before and none of them against a walled city like Jericho.

From a human point of view, this was going to be enormously difficult. Number 3, the prominence of the Ark of the Covenant. As we've seen before in Joshua, the Ark of the Covenant takes center stage here in Joshua chapter 6.

Nine times the Ark is mentioned in verses 6 to 14. It was the Ark that was to be at the very center of the defeat of Jericho. It was going to be at the very center of their marches around the city.

And as we notice the prominence of the Ark in chapters 3 and 4 as the people crossed the Jordan, the Ark was the very presence of God in the midst of his people.

And it was his presence that was going to make all the difference in this battle. The Ark, the very presence of God, was right there in the midst. And number four, the rather unorthodox nature of the battle.

[15:31] It's really quite bizarre, isn't it? Imagine the Canaanite Broadcasting Corporation with their equivalent of Kate Adie there on the front line sending back reports of the conquest.

She and all those hearing these reports have been utterly baffled. They would have witnessed a small group of armed soldiers leading out a group of priests who were playing trumpets, who in turn were followed by more priests who were carrying a large golden box, who in turn were followed by more armed soldiers.

They walk around the city. They go back to camp. They do that six more days running. And on the seventh, they walk around at seven times. And they shout loudly.

And the wall falls flat. Simply astonishing. And for Joshua, for his army, for the people of Jericho, for those onlooking, those in surrounding cities that heard about it, they would have been in no doubt whatsoever that this was the work of the Lord.

His people did nothing but walk around the city and yet the walls fell flat. This was the same God who parted the Red Sea. This was the same God who stopped the Jordan flowing.

[16:53] This was the God who caused the hearts of the inhabitants to melt away in fear. And this is the same God who gives us victory over our enemies.

And he does it in a way that looks utterly bizarre to the onlooker. The central event in all of human history, the cross of Christ, the events through which God defeated Satan, death, and all his enemies.

It looks, to be frank, bizarre, and weak. The Son of God dying on a cross, really? How weak? Walking around a city blowing trumpets. How weak? The Lord's method for extending his kingdom here and now on this earth looks equally weak.

He does it through the church. He does it through the message that is proclaimed through local congregations, just like this one the world over. How very weak and feeble-looking to the onlooker.

[17:58] How totally bizarre. This is how God's people fight battles? How bizarre. But it is as the church goes about its regular work of mission, of proclaiming the gospel news of Christ's victory over his enemies, and the implications of that victory, that is how God builds his kingdom.

That is how God goes about his work. That is how he fights his battles. But sometimes he will do something so unusual, so baffling, so extraordinary that the praise and honor and glory can go only to him.

Sometimes he works so extraordinary through weak people. He does something beyond even our best abilities so that it is so clear to us, so clear to everyone that looks on, that the power belongs to him and to him alone.

It was only possible if the Lord was at work. Now maybe you've seen that up close in real life. The way in which someone's life has been completely and utterly turned around.

From disaster and despair to purpose and joy. From death to new life in Christ. Utterly impossible unless the Lord was at work in their lives.

[19:23] you've experienced it in your own life as you turned in repentance from your sin and flung yourself upon his mercy and you now enjoy life as one of his children.

That was not done by human. That was not through our efforts but that was the work of the Lord.

The Lord's ways look remarkably weak. How foolish to walk around a city blowing trumpets.

How foolish to send your son to die on a cross. It looks so weak but the Lord's at work. He fights his battles and he wins his battles for his people.

But that does not mean that his people do nothing. Again and again the writer is careful to record that Joshua and the people are careful to obey all that the Lord commands.

They do it exactly. Have a look at verse 6. After the Lord has spoken to Joshua he calls the priests and passes on the instructions exactly. And then again in verse 8 just as Joshua commanded the people and he goes on to report the actions of the army and they do just as was instructed by the Lord.

[20:34] The fact that the Lord was fighting this battle for them the fact that he verse 2 had already in a sense given them the victory. He had already given Jericho into their hands does not negate their obligation to obey.

Obedience to God's word really matters as chapter 7 so vividly and tragically illustrates as we'll see next week. The fact that the Lord was fighting this battle did not mean that Joshua pulled out his lazy boy sofa and enjoyed the spectacle from a distance.

No. That God was fighting for his people did not mean that his people were passive. Trusting God's word words that he would give them Jericho meant action.

Faith always means action. In the New Testament letter of the Hebrews we read in chapter 11 that by faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

It was by faith. It was as they walked around. And so as we are engaged in less visible but no less real battles we are not just to sit back.

[21 : 45] We are not to put our feet up leaving it up to God. Christ may have won the decisive victory but that does not do away with the obligation to obey his words to act in faith.

It's at the heart of the Great Commission isn't it? Not just to go and proclaim but to teach people how to obey the commands. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians where he deals very explicitly with spiritual warfare warfare.

He does not suggest that God's people take it easy. Far from it. He says put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. And a bit later he says take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God praying at all times in the spirit with all prayer and supplication.

To that end keep alert with all perseverance making supplication for all the saints. There's the Lord's command to New Testament believers who are in the midst of warfare.

Yes it is he who ultimately fights and wins the battles that we face but all of us everyone here has a role to play an obligation to take up the armor to pray to make supplication for all the saints.

[23 : 10] Are you taking that responsibility? The prayer meeting this Wednesday are we praying? Are we praying for the work of the gospel? It's not easy.

It's probably not your first choice of things to do on a Wednesday evening but after a busy day it is what God calls us to do and we are in warfare mode. We are in the midst of a battle and prayer is one of the weapons that God has given us and we get to take part.

We get to join God's army which is a victorious one and what a great privilege that is. God fights and wins the battle for his people but he calls us to join him.

We don't just sit back. So the Lord fights and wins the battle which does not mean that his people do nothing. There's our first point.

Secondly the Lord commands the destruction of his enemy looking particularly at verses 15 to 21. The Lord commands the destruction of his enemy.

[24 : 22] Now this makes a rather uncomfortable reading doesn't it for the modern westerner. The instructions for what Israel and the army are to do to Jericho.

We read there in verses 16 to 19. Take a look again. Verse 17 and the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction.

Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in a house shall live. And then look down to verse 21. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction.

both men and women young and old oxen sheep and donkeys with the edge of the saws. That makes us squirm in our seats.

And perhaps you can see where the atheist Dawkins is coming from when he writes the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction. Jealous and proud of it.

[25 : 26] a petty unjust unforgiving control freak a vindictive bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser. And he goes on. Well how about this from someone a little closer to home who identifies himself as an evangelical although he demonstrates pretty clearly he isn't he says this the treatment of the Canaanites is indefensible and we need to stop trying to defend it.

Now we feel the pull of those sentiments don't we? This is a tough read. This is the kind of thing we don't want our friends asking us about. You don't want your friend turning to Joshua 6 and saying explain that.

It's tempting to airbrush it out. Well I'm not going to mount a defense of it but I am going to give the Bible's reasons for it. And they come under two headings beginning with P protection of Israel and punishment for sin.

And particularly the punishment of Canaan. But before we go further we need to understand the events here in Joshua and the wider picture of what the Old Testament says about warfare.

In Deuteronomy chapter 20 the laws for war the rules of engagement are set out and there was a very sharp distinction between how wars were to be conducted normally and the way in which the conquest of Canaan was to be carried out in particular.

[26 : 50] Let me read from Deuteronomy chapter 20 he's talking about different ways of warfare he says this when you draw near to a city to fight against it this is a regular battle offer terms of peace to it and if it responds to you peaceably and opens to you then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you but if it makes no peace with you but makes war against you then you shall besiege it and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand you shall put all its males to the sword but the women and the little ones the livestock and everything else in

the city all its spoils you shall take as plunder for yourselves and you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies which the Lord your God has given you thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you which are not cities of the nation here now verse 16 but in the cities of the peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for inheritance that is Canaan you shall save alive nothing that breathes but you shall devote them to complete destruction the Hittites the Amorites the Canaanites the Perizzites the Hivites and the Jebusites as the

Lord your God has commanded that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods and so you sin against them and against the Lord your God so there the Lord is setting out the rules of engagement and from verse 16 in Deuteronomy setting out the rules of engagement for tackling the Canaanites so to quote one commentator he says that the instructions to Israel to annihilate the Canaanites were specific in time intent and geography Israel was not given a blanket permission to do the same to any people they encountered at any time or in any place this was specific to the Canaanites but having said that why is Canaan singled out for this sort of treatment why Canaan why not the other nations well two reasons protection of Israel firstly this devotion to destruction is not a counter to a military threat but to a religious one the destruction of an idolatrous people which is what the Canaanites were if you want to later read Leviticus 18 or Deuteronomy 18 to get a sense of their astonishing sexual immorality the Canaanites were an idolatrous people and that was necessary to protect Israel from that hideous immorality that would otherwise have seeped in and infected the people of Israel Deuteronomy 20 verse 18 gives the reason why they are to do this it is so that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices God's purpose in commanding the destruction of the Canaanites is so that his people would be protected so that they would be holy as they take possession of the land they would be totally separated from the idolatry of the pagan nations failure to separate themselves would lead to a failure to be what God purposed them to be which was a kingdom of priests and a holy nation among the people of the earth a people who demonstrate the wisdom of God to the world by their obedience to God's law and God knew God knew the preponderance of the human heart to idolatry and so he instructs them to remove completely the greatest threat to their holiness which was the Canaanites now if that shocks us then perhaps we have too low a view of holiness our view of God's unique holiness is maybe truncated limited and so our view of the holiness of his people is likewise truncated the action of Joshua here seems a little extreme but that is totally to underestimate just how holy and set apart and majestic and glorious the God of all creation is and the lengths to which he will go to protect the holiness of his people is staggering I wonder if we see the importance of holiness do I see the importance it was seriously important to

God to the people of Israel God commanded this destruction of a nation so that his people might be protected that they might be holy that's the first reason secondly it was the punishment of Canaan so alongside the maintenance of the purity of his people the Lord sanctions the conquest of Canaan in order to punish their sin in Deuteronomy chapter 9 the Lord says this not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out before you it was because of their wickedness and this builds on the words God spoke to Abraham generations before when he told Abraham that his descendants would return to Canaan because their iniquity is not yet complete God was going to be patient he gave them 400 years to repent from their sin and as [32 : 49] Leviticus details their sins included child sacrifice incest bestiality they were a sinful nation and rightly the Lord after centuries of patience punishes them for it this isn't mean or vindictive this is the just judgment of a holy God now the writer of Joshua has not one hint of embarrassment nor does he give any sense of being uncomfortable does he that God will destroy his enemies is a good thing it is testament to his justice to his refusal to overlook sin and rebellion these acts of judgment on Canaan were severe there's no doubting that but the New Testament's testimony is that there is a far greater far more widespread judgment of God as enemies to come so the question is not so much do you believe in God's judgment on Jericho but do you believe in God's final acts of judgment that we read about in vivid detail in the book of

Revelation Dick Lucas puts it so sharply to disbelieve in Joshua's judgment will inevitably lead to disbelieve in the judgment to come if we jettison and disown Joshua 6 which is a small and local judgment of God on a sinful city then we'll jettison and disown the universal judgment to come that we read about in the New Testament if we're embarrassed about Joshua 6 we'll be embarrassed

about Revelation and most of the New Testament it is the Bible's consistent testimony that all people will one day die and face judgment before the God of all creation you see the God of Joshua 6 is our God he hates sin and he will one day finally punish it fully and that day is coming and it will be a terrible thing for those like

Jericho who refuse to repent but alongside the terror of that judgment there is the comfort of the gospel and that is our third point this evening the Lord is gracious to outsiders who fling themselves upon his mercy verse 17 and verses 22 to 25 in the midst of this chapter up crops Rahab again and isn't that just a wonderful reminder of God's astonishing grace and mercy against the backdrop of a city's destruction the writer zooms in on one woman and her household and it's not just any woman but a pagan prostitute now of course in one sense we're not surprised by this if we've read Joshua from the start we know all about

Rahab we read that remarkable story in chapter 2 of the spies and Rahab and of her remarkable confession and turning to the Lord for mercy she knew there was a judgment coming she knew her city was destined for destruction and she flings herself on the Lord for mercy and in that account in chapter 2 the spies promised to spare her and her household when they returned with the whole army of Israel you can almost imagine Rahab there can't you in her house her family gathered around her as they peer out of her home which is built into the city wall watching the rather bizarre events of Joshua chapter 6 that strange week where the army walk around once each day will the Lord's people remember me will he have mercy yes is the answer Rahab and all her family are saved alive by

Joshua and verse 25 we see that she lived in Israel to this day the promise of salvation was wonderfully realized when God's judgment fell on Jericho it was only by faith in the provisions of his grace that sinners could be saved that is how Rahab was saved how any of the inhabitants of Jericho could also have been saved if they flung themselves in his mercy there is a way of salvation and it is found only in the mercy of the God who brings judgments for anyone who comes to the realization that they are standing under the judgment of God there is mercy even for you in the midst of judgments there is mercy so then here is the message of Joshua chapter 6 the Lord fights and wins the battle over his enemies showing grace to those who fling themselves upon his mercy if you are not a

[38 : 15] Christian here this evening if you do not know the Lord then I have to warn you that as with every battle as with every war there are only two sides one wins and the others defeated God is coming in fearsome judgment one day and it's not just Jericho that stands condemned but everyone all have fallen short of the glory of God all are sinners but he is gracious to those who fling themselves upon his mercy so will you repent will you fling yourself upon his mercy as Rahab did will you if you're a Christian here this evening take great courage from this passage yes the opposition often looks intimidating frightening even the world the flesh the devil are ferocious enemies if you never feel intimidated if you never feel scared never worried check your pulse yes the means by which we're to fight the spiritual battle look terribly weak and pathetic don't they the weapons he gives us are the word and prayer how foolish that looks from the outside not impressive looking but they are the weapons that the

Lord of all creation the Lord who opened the Red Sea who stopped the Jordan who made the Jericho walls fall flat they are the weapons that the Lord has given to his people and they are reminders aren't they that the power does not rest with us but with him alone it was clear crystal clear that Joshua did not defeat Jericho and it should be crystal clear to us that we do not defeat our enemies today it is God and God alone who does that and that should greatly encourage you there is an enemy there is a battle but God is on your side he fights the battle he wins and one day everyone will see it everyone will know that the Lord is victorious one day and if he is able to fight that great battle the ultimate battle how much more can we trust him for the daily skirmishes we face battles against our own sinfulness battles against the hostility of the world colleagues who give you a hard time for your faith feeling intimidated because you dare to hold to what the truth of the Bible is even in those skirmishes be reminded of the big picture knowing that in the end everyone will know that God has won the battle that is great comfort knowing the victory is assured that is a great comfort that emboldens us to keep standing Joshua is God he is our God he is with his people he fights the battle he will win let me pray father these are on the one hand greatly encouraging but greatly sobering words there is a battle that scares us but there is a great warrior and the decisive blow has already been dealt the end is assured the victory is assured and so as you face daily

battles daily discouragements help us know the certainty that you are a God who fights for his people you are a God who wins the battle and might we trust you and might we hold out the hope to this world that in the midst of judgment there is mercy and might we hold out that wonderful assurance in the gospel that those who fling themselves upon him will be shown mercy strengthen us Lord encourage us for the battle help us to play our role for you equip us we thank you in Jesus name Amen