

3. Jonah - Learning the Hard Way: God's Compassion to the Undeserving

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[0 : 00] Well friends, perhaps you'd like to turn up the book of Jonah, which you'll find on page 775, at least you'll find chapter 3 on page 775 in our church Bibles.

Whenever we study a particular book of the Bible, there are a number of key questions which we need to address, we need to ask.

For example, what is this book doing in the Bible? Or why has the Lord caused this book to be preserved for us? What would the Bible lack if this book were missing?

Or why does the human author of this book write this book in this particular way? Now those are the sort of questions that I've been trying to wrestle over these last few weeks while I've been living with Jonah.

And I want at this stage to put forward a tentative answer to the question, what is the book of Jonah here in the Bible for? I'd like you to chew this answer over.

[1 : 16] You might want to spit it out after a few chews, but you might want also to discuss it with me and help me to understand it better, and I would welcome that. So here goes.

Here's a tentative answer as to what the book of Jonah is doing in the Bible. I pointed out a fortnight ago that there's something about the book of Jonah that suggests comedy.

There's a cartoon-like atmosphere in the whole book. If you were good at cartoons, I guess you could easily portray the whole thing as a cartoon strip. You could represent the voice of God as he speaks to Jonah and commands him to go to Nineveh.

You could represent the storm, the big fish, the swallowing, the regurgitation, the preaching at Nineveh, and the final scene in chapter 4 when we have the castor oil plant and the worm that comes and destroys it, and Jonah still looking cross and angry at the end, and so on.

The story has an atmosphere all of its own. There's no other book in the Old or New Testament which is quite like it. Now over the centuries, some commentators, quite a number, and preachers, have suggested that Jonah himself may have been the human author of the book.

[2 : 30] There's no way of proving that, but it seems to me to be a real possibility. And if he is the author of this book, might he not be giving us his testimony, telling the world about this most important and formative episode of his life, but doing it in a self-deprecating kind of way, and thus the humour and the cartoon-like atmosphere of the book.

There's something almost British about Jonah's self-deprecating humour, if he's the author of the book. Now if he is, isn't Jonah saying to us, what a fool I was.

I had to learn a big lesson about God, and I had to learn it the hard way. Although I was a prophet, I was ungodly and rebellious. And I didn't understand that God had a worldwide mission and a worldwide purpose.

I didn't grasp that God compassionately cared even for people like the Ninevites. But God was determined to show me that he was deeply interested in them, as well as in the people of Israel.

Now the big message of the book of Jonah is that God is engaged in a worldwide missionary purpose. And if he is engaged in that worldwide mission, so should we be.

[3 : 52] So should the reader be. So Jonah is saying, I had to learn in a most uncomfortable and humiliating way what God's mission is and how it extends beyond the borders of Israel.

I had to learn that God had compassion on the horrible Ninevites. So I had to learn to have compassion on them as well. Initially, I feared them, I despised them, I hated them.

But God has turned my thinking through 180 degrees. And I want you, my reader, to learn the same lesson, but without having to go through quite the same traumatic experience that I had to endure in

order to learn.

So friends, are we willing to learn from Jonah the easy way, in the comfort of our seats, or perhaps in the comfort of our armchairs at home? If we're not willing to learn the lesson of the book of Jonah the easy way, maybe we're going to have to learn it the hard way.

In fact, come to think of it, as I was crossing the Kingston Bridge this evening on my way here to church, I did see a large, dark fin cruising up and down in the river. So if you don't love the Ninevites, you'd better steer clear of the River Clyde and definitely don't take that day trip to the Isle of Aran this week, even if you're planning to.

[5 : 09] So let's turn to this third chapter of the book of Jonah, and we'll look at it under the title, God's Compassion to the Undeserving. We'll look at his compassion to three different groups of people.

First, God's compassion to a forgiven malcontent, who is, of course, Jonah himself. Let me read again the first verse or two of the chapter.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you. So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

Now the first verse there is stated in such a plain and straightforward way that we can easily miss how wonderful it is. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the second time.

Isn't the Lord kind to this man who has been so obstinate and downright disobedient? In fact, the Lord behaves to him rather differently from the way that you and I might behave in a similar situation.

[6 : 17] Imagine, for example, that you were the proprietor of a small business, and you had an employee who had worked for you for a while, and then let you down badly.

He behaved disobediently or perhaps dishonestly, and you had to sack him. And then a few months later, this former employee gets in touch with you and asks if he might possibly have his job back again.

Now, if I were the owner of that business, I would be very hesitant, wouldn't you? In fact, I would probably say to him, I'm very sorry, I can't take you back because of what happened a while ago. I'm not certain that I can trust you to do a good job in the future. Your past record testifies against you. Now, that is not the way that the Lord deals with Jonah.

He reinstates him and entrusts him with exactly the same commission that he'd originally given to him. He doesn't demote him or downgrade him. He entrusts him again with this high profile and demanding commission.

[7 : 21] And this is all the more extraordinary when you realize that Jonah's heart was still not fully won over at this stage. He still hadn't learned to see the Ninevites as God saw them.

In fact, he doesn't learn the lesson that God has for him until sometime after chapter 4, verse 11. Until sometime after the whole book comes to an end.

I guess in chapter 5, really, if we can imagine a chapter 5. So, God is prepared to forgive this malcontent, this old grump, and to recommission him when he is still an old grump who hasn't fully learned his lesson.

In fact, he's worse, really, than an old grump. He's a man who still lacks compassion for the lost. He still has no wish to bring the lost folk into the realm of salvation.

And yet, God still uses him as an effective channel of his message. Now, we need to see chapter 3, verse 1 in the context of the whole book. It won't do for us to look at chapter 3, verse 1, and to say, well, it's okay, isn't it, for me to be a half-hearted, old grumpy servant of the Lord, because he'll use me despite my grumpiness and my half-heartedness.

[8 : 36] No, we can't say that, because the book of Jonah is designed to move us completely beyond that wretched view of Christian service, to a point where we love the Ninevites as much as God loves them, a point where we share God's compassion for them.

But the glorious thing is that God does not cast off the old grump Jonah. He recommissions him, he sets him to work again, and he re-entrusts him with a very significant part to play in what we might call the Old Testament Great Commission.

And he does all this when Jonah is still in a half-hearted, grumpy frame of mind. God is not content to leave him in that frame of mind.

That's why we have Jonah 4, and the imaginary Jonah 5, as well as Jonah 3. But he is prepared to use a servant of his, whose motives are still very mixed, and whose heart is not fully aligned with God's purposes.

So isn't God remarkably kind to this man Jonah? Now I'm tempted to say at this point, all old grumps, hands up.

[9 : 45] But I'm not going to say that, I'm not going to say that, because if you're an old grump, you will know that without having to tell everybody else about it, but also because it's possible to be an old grump in a youthful body.

You could be under 40, you could be even under 30, and yet still be getting cross with God when he stirs you into compassionate evangelistic activity.

Do you remember the parable Jesus told in Matthew chapter 18 about the unforgiving servant? The servant who lacked compassion. The man who was forgiven a huge debt by his master, but then wouldn't show compassion to his fellow servant, who owed him just a small amount of money.

He was a man happy to receive forgiveness, but he wasn't happy to give it to somebody else. Now Jonah, we can be sure, was very happy to be disgorged by the fish, and very happy to be given a new life by the Lord.

But he was still unhappy about the Lord's message to the Ninevites. He was happy to receive God's compassion, but he was not happy to give it to others. So there's the first point.

[10 : 51] God showed huge compassion to Jonah, even though Jonah had still not learned to show it to people that he disliked and feared. Then second, we see God's compassion to hostile outsiders.

To hostile outsiders. Nineveh was a pagan city. It was the capital city of Assyria. And the Assyrians, only 50 or 60 years after Jonah's day, moved into Israel and brought Israel to an end, as a nation state.

They sacked the city of Samaria. They deported the Israelites. And yet, God cared very deeply about the people of Nineveh. So let's see how Jonah chapter 3 shows us God's compassion for the city.

The first thing, the first way in which he showed compassion to Nineveh was that he sent them a prophet. Now that was a mercy. He need not have done so, but he did because he so wanted their repentance.

The second thing is that this prophet proclaimed his message to the ordinary people of Nineveh. It reached the ears of the king eventually in verse 6, but Jonah announced it in the streets to the crowds, just like Jesus centuries later, a message for all the people.

[12 : 13] The third thing is that the king and the nobles also heard the message and believed it. It was a message, therefore, that touched every level of society in Nineveh from the top to the bottom.

But the fourth thing, and this is what I wanted to dwell on this evening, is the extraordinary effect that such a brief and apparently gloomy message had on the city.

Just look at the sermon Jonah preached. There it is in verse 4, and it's only 8 words long. Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

Amen. And then on to the next street corner a moment later. Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And so on and so on. Now, of course, Jonah's message in reality may have been rather longer.

The Bible has a habit of giving us shorthand notes of fuller sermons that were actually given. But what we have in verse 4 is certainly the kernel, the heart of the message.

[13 : 12] And this really was the message that God gave to Jonah. Just look back to chapter 1, verse 2. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, now here's the message, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

God is against Nineveh because of its evil way of life. And now look on to chapter 3, verse 2. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, the message that I tell you.

So it's exactly the same thing. So in both chapter 1, verse 2, and chapter 3, verse 2, God calls Nineveh a great city. It was possibly the greatest city of the ancient Gentile world.

It was very large in extent, very fine in architecture, and yet God is against it. He's against it. He has a quarrel with the Ninevites. He deeply disapproves of it.

His anger is directed towards it. In fact, in chapter 1, verse 2, God says, their evil has come up before me, which is almost exactly what he had said about Sodom and Gomorrah back in Genesis

chapter 18.

[14:22] And yet, to this city, whose evil has been so great that it has come up to God's notice, God sends a prophet with a message of judgment.

There doesn't seem to be a trace of good news, does there, in Jonah's message. Only bad news. And yet, God sends the prophet with the message of doom because he is deeply compassionate towards the people of Nineveh.

Now, isn't it rather odd to think that a message of doom might come from a heart of compassion? Well, let me put it like this. Just imagine that Jonah's message had been a message of sweetness and love and light.

People of Nineveh, the Lord loves you, all of you. He's promising you showers of blessings. There'll be flocks in your fields, there'll be figs and grapes in your orchards, there'll be olive oil by the bucket full, you'll have sunshine and grain.

Love the Lord for he dotes upon you. Share with him and with each other as you sing your songs and you share your fellowship meals of quiche Lorraine and cucumber sandwiches.

[15:31] The Lord is so kind, he loves everybody. Now, if that had been Jonah's message, the Ninevites surely would quickly have pelted him with rotten eggs and said to him, Jonah, we don't want your sappy, sappy message about the love of God.

Run back to Gath Heifer and plant potatoes. What kind of a message is that? But Jonah delivered them an ultimatum from God. Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown, destroyed.

Now, that was a serious message. That was a message calculated to make the Ninevites think. They could not ignore it. They were afraid. They had to realize that God, the real God, was a God who could not be trifled with.

This was a message calculated to bring them to repentance. God commanded their repentance because he cared about them so deeply. Now, just think of your own experience.

If you're a Christian, what was it that brought you to Christ at the beginning? Yes, it was the gospel of the love of God for you. But you only began to see the depth and power of the love of God when you realized how much it had cost him to rescue you and what he had rescued you from.

[16:50] Love is most true and most real when it is most costly. And you began to realize how great God's love to you was when you realized that it had cost him the life of his son.

Suddenly, things became serious as you realized that. So you asked, but why did God have to see his son die? And then you understood that Jesus died so as to save you the consequences of God's anger with you.

That Jesus died in order to endure the judgment that you deserved so that you would not have to endure it yourself. So you came to realize that you were under God's judgment that your sin in living without God called forth his righteous anger and you became fearful and rightly so of God's judgment and you repented and you put your trust in Christ because you knew that if you spurned the salvation offered to you through the love of God you would have to endure the judgment and the condemnation of God for eternity.

So you began to see that God's salvation and God's judgment are very closely connected. When we're saved by God we're not saved primarily from our personal hang-ups or our psychological immaturities or even from poverty or ill health but from what the apostle Paul calls the wrath to come.

It's the love of God the compassion of God that causes him to stretch out his hand to rescue us from the flames. If Jonah had said to the Ninevites it's alright everybody relax God loves you all they would have said well who cares about that but when Jonah said the destruction of your city is imminent because of your wickedness that was a message that they had to listen to.

[18:48] It was the love of God that lay behind it but God knew that there could be no salvation for the Ninevites unless they repented and he knew that there could be no repentance unless they knew about the judgment to come.

And what was the message of Jesus some 800 years later? Jesus who was sent by the love of God God who so loved the world his message was repent and believe the gospel.

Why repent? Why did he call for repentance? Because the judgment is coming. Now our message is a fuller message than Jonah's.

His was a message of judgment. We have good news. Ours is a message of salvation from judgment. But woe to us friends if we omit the judgment. We can't do that if we're to be true to the

Lord and true to the biblical gospel.

If we love people at all we must teach them from the Bible that God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world with righteousness by the man whom he has appointed as Paul put it to the Athenians.

[19 : 57] So the day of judgment is in the Lord's diary. It's fixed. And the whole of history is rushing towards that great day like the Zambezi river rushing towards the Victoria Falls.

It is coming. But God has sent a savior out of his great love for us who will save us on that dreadful day if we will repent and turn to him.

Now back to Jonah chapter 3 and the people of Nineveh. There is Jonah in verse 4 calling out his fearsome message. Now we learn from verse 3 that Nineveh was so big that it took three days to walk right across it.

But verse 4 tells us that Jonah had only gone one third of the way across the city when the whole city repented. In other words so powerful was his message of 40 day ultimatum from God that one day's preaching was all that was required to bring the whole city to its knees.

Look at the way it's put in verse 5 The people of Nineveh believed God. Now just notice that phrase. The verse is not saying that they believed in God.

[21 : 06] To say that they believed in God would not be saying very much at all. 70% of the people of Britain today approximately believe in God. but it doesn't bring them to repentance or faith in Christ.

A person can say I believe in God without his life being changed by a hair's breadth. No. When verse 5 tells us that the Ninevites believed God it means they believed his message.

The thing that Jonah said they believed that it was true. They believed that he meant what he said that he would indeed destroy the city in 40 days if they didn't repent. In other words they took the Lord absolutely seriously.

Jonah's message pierced them to the heart and they responded in the only way they could respond by repenting. And do you see it was real repentance.

It wasn't just a matter of putting on sackcloth. It involved a renunciation of their evil and violent lifestyle. So their king says to them in his proclamation in verse 8 let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

[22 : 12] Who knows God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish. And when God saw what they did not just how they felt but what they did how they turned from their evil way he relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

Now that's repentance not just putting on sackcloth not just feeling qualms of sorrow and remorse but actually stopping doing the evil things. And because God was so compassionate to these people because they were included in his worldwide missionary plans he relented he stayed his hand he did not blot out the city of Nineveh and treat it as he had treated Sodom and Gomorrah centuries before he spared the great population of the city.

So God is remarkably compassionate first to Jonah although Jonah is still a malcontent and second to the people of Nineveh and third well before I tell you the third object of God's compassion let's remind ourselves of the bare bones of the story so far.

We have a preacher who is sent by God his message is a message of judgment designed to lead to repentance however this preacher this prophet has to undergo an unspeakable ordeal a death a kind of death a disappearance from sight a sojourn in the belly of shale followed by a kind of rebirth or resurrection three days later.

Now it rings some obvious bells doesn't it? The God sent preacher the message designed to lead to repentance the death the resurrection three days afterwards.

[24 : 02] So I want us to look thirdly and this involves leaping forward 800 years or so I want us to look at God's compassion on Jesus' contemporaries.

Can we turn here to Matthew chapter 12 keep a finger in Jonah but we'll turn to Matthew chapter 12 and verse 38 on page 817 in our church bibles.

It's always fascinating and instructive to see how Jesus and the apostles incorporate Old Testament passages and Old Testament incidents into their teaching and this one is particularly striking when we come to see why Jesus brings Jonah into his teaching.

So let me read verses 38 to 41 of Matthew 12. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

But he answered them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. [25 : 15] The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Now, what is going on here? Well, we have a group of scribes and Pharisees and we know that the scribes and Pharisees are deeply hostile towards Jesus. They consider themselves to be the guardians of the Jewish faith, the accredited teachers of the law of Moses.

And here is this wandering young rabbi, Jesus, who says a lot of strong things that seem to challenge their authority and their understanding of Judaism. And they don't like it, and they don't like him.

And Matthew chapter 12 up to this point has been recording various incidents in which Jesus has been locked into controversy with different Jewish leaders. So in verse 38, some of them issue him with this challenge.

Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. What an extraordinary request it is. In this very chapter, chapter 12, he has just healed a man with a withered hand.

[26 : 25] Isn't that a kind of sign? Verse 13, he's healed a demon possessed man in verse 22. Don't those miracles count? Did they want a different kind of sign?

Well, possibly. It's interesting that if you read a similar passage in Matthew 16, verse 1, he is asked there for a sign from heaven. So possibly the Pharisees and the scribes saw these healing miracles merely as earthly signs, things.

And they wanted to see some great portent in the sky which would somehow authenticate Jesus and his ministry. But he is not prepared to pander to their unbelief and hardness of heart.

So he tells them in verse 39 that it's an evil, adulterous generation that seeks a sign. Adulterous in the sense of being unfaithful to God.

So he refuses them at one level. He refuses to create some spectacular miracle to dazzle them and to make them believe in him in a shallow way.

[27 : 27] However, he does give them a sign of sorts. It wasn't the kind they looked for, but he gives them a sign in the form of a few words designed to provoke them and make them think.

Now they were students of the Old Testament. They knew their book of Jonah. They knew how the people of Nineveh had responded to Jonah's curt message of doom. So he says to these hostile Pharisees, I will give you a sign.

Go back to your Old Testament. Let's just notice incidentally the evangelists instinctive reaching for the scriptures. We preach the gospel today, don't we, from the Bible.

And Jesus brings the contemporary message from the ancient word. That's always the way. So he says to them, go to your Old Testament, to the story of Jonah, and I will give you the sign of the prophet Jonah, if you really want a sign to authenticate me and what I'm doing.

And the sign of Jonah is this. A prophet, three days dead, and then brought back to life, and this prophet, sent by the God of compassion and mercy, preaches a message of repentance, or a message designed to lead to repentance.

[28 : 38] What did the people of Nineveh do when they heard the message of judgment that was designed to lead them to repentance? They repented, and God spared them. They took seriously the message of this three days dead prophet who was raised again.

And yet, Jesus is implying, you people today, you have the same opportunity that the Ninevites of old had. You have the prophet who is to be dead three days and to rise again.

And he too is preaching a message of repentance because judgment is coming. And yet, you do not repent. How can this be? Your hearts have become stone.

The dead and raised prophet that you have is a far greater prophet than Jonah ever was. Indeed, he is God's own son who speaks the very words of God. And yet, you won't repent.

It's just, it's agonizing to Jesus to see how hard their hearts have become. In fact, a little bit later in this gospel, Matthew 23, 37, he says, Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

[29 : 46] How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. And you would not. You'd have none of it. See, he says, your house is left to you desolate.

For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. So this is the sign of Jonah, given by Jesus to his hard-hearted critics.

He is saying to them, allow the experience and the preaching of Jonah to illuminate what I'm doing and my preaching. Jonah and I, he is saying, are in the same pattern.

We are both preachers of the necessity of repentance in the face of imminent judgment. We are both shown to be approved by God by an experience of death and resurrection, even though in Jesus' case it hadn't yet happened.

Therefore, and here is the rub, if Jonah's preaching of repentance led to repentance, how much more should my preaching of repentance lead to your repentance, he is saying to them, because I am greater than Jonah.

[30 : 55] So the sign of Jonah is a great sign if only they will heed it and soften their hearts. But they won't soften their hearts. And Jesus knows that they are not going to, which is why he then has to say in Matthew 12, 41, the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented of the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

That is to say, on the day of judgment, the men of Nineveh will stand up and testify against these first century Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and condemn them. Because they, the Ninevites, they took God's message so seriously that they repented at the little sermon of a little prophet.

How much more should these scribes and Pharisees have repented at the preaching of the Son of God, but they wouldn't do it. If God had compassion on the Ninevites by sending them Jonah, how much more compassion has he had on Jesus' contemporaries and upon us by sending them Jesus, but they would not listen to him.

Well, friends, let me draw two brief applications from all this and then we'll finish. The first is that if Jesus' contemporaries didn't repent at his preaching, we mustn't be surprised if some people don't turn to the Lord as we explain the gospel.

We've very much got Terry and Ewan and Scott and the others in mind, haven't we, who are preparing to go off to Nairobi at the end of this week. They mustn't be surprised if their message is not met by repentance at every step.

[32 : 36] You see, we so want our friends, don't we, to come to Christ and yet some of them don't. And as Jesus did, we sometimes weep because they won't come to Christ. We can't understand why they should be so hard-hearted, why they try to weave and duck and try every trick in the book so as to evade the loving call of Christ.

We say to them, come to Jesus, and they say, I will not. Well, it happened to Jesus, so we're in the best of company. But do bear in mind the much bigger picture in which we experience this painful frustration of difficult evangelism.

Yes, Jesus encountered fierce opposition and hardness of heart, but was his work unfruitful? Not at all. His work has been hugely fruitful, and he promises that we too will bear fruit.

So let's learn to see the hard-hearted rejections and frustrations within the much bigger picture of great and real and enduring fruitfulness. And then second, let's learn from Jonah and the Ninevites that repentance can take place even in the most unlikely people.

The Ninevites were most unlikely. For example, who in 1945 could have predicted the growth of the Christian church in communist China as it has taken place over the last 50 or 60 years?

[34 : 05] Or in parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the last century or so? Or in parts of Latin America more recently? Who are today's Ninevites? Ninevites. Those that we might fear, hate, or despise.

Those who seem so hard-hearted against the message. The Muslim world or parts of it. Arise, Jonah. Go to Mecca and preach there. You must be joking, Lord.

All right then, go to Islamabad and preach there. Lord, forgive me, this is madness. I'll go to Penzance, Lord. I'll go to Tennessee. I'll even go to Edinburgh.

People in such places are much more likely to respond to the gospel, aren't they? But how can we know who is likely to respond to the gospel? Were you likely to respond to Christ?

Because you were nice? Because you had decent table manners and a charming mother? Of course not. Weren't we all gruesome Ninevites? We were full of wickedness and self-centeredness.

[35 : 07] And yet, the Lord had mercy upon us. And he showed his compassion to those who were deeply undeserving. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

We tell you again, our dear Father, with very thankful hearts that we are just like those people of Nineveh, who were wicked and self-centered and violent. And yet they heard the preaching of the man that you sent and they repented.

And we too, by your grace, have heard the voice of the Lord Jesus and we too turn in repentance and faith to him and to you. And we ask you, therefore, dear Father, to teach us to love those that we might naturally wish to despise or hate or fear.

We do pray again, very particularly for Terry McCutcheon and his team of fellow evangelists as they prepare to go to Nairobi to a difficult city.

And we pray that their preaching, their witness, may be attended by great fruitfulness. And we pray too that you will help us to develop a worldwide and compassionate view of all people, all peoples.

[36 : 31] And that you will help us to be faithful and persevering and joyful and enduring in our own evangelism. We ask it in Jesus Christ's name.

Amen.