

1. You really are converted

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Date: 09 November 2008

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[0 : 00] And the usual question is the really important question. And the usual question is, why did Paul write this letter?

Now that question is always the all-important question because if we can find out why Paul wrote a particular letter, we're more than halfway to understanding the letter. And in this sense, a letter from Paul is just the same as any of the letters or emails that we write ourselves.

You don't send off a letter or an email without having a good reason for writing. Now your reason may be clear and forceful. For example, dear Mr. Smith, I write to remind you that your annual rental payment of £500 is two weeks overdue, etc., etc.

Well, the purpose of that letter is fairly plain, isn't it? Other letters may have a clear purpose but not quite so clear. And yet there's still a good reason for them. So, for example, you might be ten years old and writing to your great-aunt Augusta who lives in a retirement home at Frinton-on-C.

Dear Aunt Gussie, Mummy suggested that I write to let you know that Richard has had tonsillitis.

And by the way, we have a super new puppy called Trixie.

[1 : 15] It's a sausage dog. And I hope you hadn't forgotten that it's my birthday on the 27th. With lots of love, Fiona. Now, there may be mixed motives in a letter like that, but you can still see that Fiona's main reason for writing is that she's hoping that her great-aunt will send her a few pounds for her birthday.

There's always a reason for a letter. Nobody fires off letters to no purpose. And certainly a very busy man like Paul the Apostle would not have spent time and parchment and ink without a very good reason for writing.

So before we dive into the letter itself this evening, I'd like to spend a little bit of time trying to establish Paul's reason for writing 1 Thessalonians. Because if we can get that clear in our minds, it will help us to make much more sense of the various themes and subjects that Paul deals with in the letter itself.

So can we turn back together to Acts chapter 17? Because it's here that Luke, the author of Acts, records for us Paul's initial visit to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica being a town in northern Greece. So this is the account. You'll find this on page 926. Here's the account of how the church began there.

[2 : 28] So I'm reading from the first verse of Acts 17. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

And Paul went in, into the synagogue, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.

Now just notice the explosive nature of Paul's message there. Look at that last sentence in verse 3. This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.

Now do you see the dynamite there? Do you feel the semtex? The sentence looks so innocuous to us. This Jesus is the Christ. Well, we might say, our grandparents taught that to us when we were little.

The British Isles has known that for the last 18 centuries. What's so explosive about that message? Isn't it well known? Well, the explosive thing is that Paul was speaking here to Jews, and Jews were not gently disposed to seeing Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, or the Messiah of Old Testament expectation.

[3 : 46] To old Yehudi ben Eliezer, sitting on the back row of the synagogue, pew, the idea that a man crucified under the Romans might be the Messiah was enough to make him choke.

To him, how could a crucified outlaw possibly be the glorious king of David's line? It was a preposterous notion. You see, this is why Paul had to work so hard in this Jewish synagogue. Look at the verbs used of him in verses 2 and 3. Reasoning, and explaining, and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead. Now that was a very hard task in the face of a Jewish audience, because to most Jews then, and still today, the idea of a suffering Messiah is a contradiction in terms.

How could this be? In fact, I learned just the other day that many Jews, still today, are most reluctant to study the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which, as you know, is all about God's suffering servant.

And apparently, Jews are reluctant to study that chapter because they fear it might lead them to the conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah after all. And that is not a conclusion they wish to reach.

[5 : 00] So anyway, there is Paul verbally wrestling with these Thessalonian Jews about the identity of Jesus. And let's see what happens. Verse 4. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great number, a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women.

So Paul's adventure that lasted for three Sabbaths in the synagogue at Thessalonica led, it seems, to the splitting of the synagogue. A number of Jews were persuaded by Paul's arguments and they joined Paul and Silas, which probably means that they left the synagogue and they began to hold meetings elsewhere in the town.

So Paul and Silas were physically joined by these newly converted Jews and also, says Luke, by a large number of Gentiles who would have been regular attenders at the synagogue worship and by a considerable number of the leading women.

And by that phrase, I think Luke means women with a bit of muscle power to their personalities. Have you ever met a lady with a muscular personality? Well, there they were, influential Thessalonian queen bees becoming Christians and leaving the synagogue and joining a new meeting half a mile away.

Now, you can sense the dynamite in the situation, can't you? There's your happy, quiet little Thessalonica synagogue with perhaps a hundred members and it's just been trickling along in its own sweet way for decades and decades doing the sort of things that synagogues do, reading the Hebrew scriptures, knitting socks for sailors, making jam to make money for orphans and so on and so forth.

[6 : 38] And suddenly, phew, this extraordinary little Jew from Tarsus, I say little because tradition has it he was a small man, but he appears out of nowhere with his friends and he argues with unbelievable and apparently irrefutable vigor in the synagogue for three consecutive Sabbaths and half the synagogue members believe his message about the Messiah and they leave to form a new group, a Christian church.

Now, if you were one of the long-stay members of that synagogue, you would be very upset, wouldn't you? Very upset. Well, let's read on. Verse 5. But the Jews were jealous and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason.

Now, Jason perhaps was a newly converted man and perhaps the church was now meeting in his house, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.

And Jason has received them. And they're all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there's another king, Jesus. And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.

And when they'd taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. So there were very ugly scenes. Mob violence, a house being attacked, Christians being dragged before the city authorities.

[8 : 05] Of course, Jesus had said, I've not come to bring peace, but a sword. And here it is. The vigorous preaching of the gospel stirs up powerful hostilities, the jealous hostility of the Jews.

And then notice how this hostility broadens out from the theological to the political and social. In verses 6 and 7, the Christians are accused of turning the world upside down, which really means causing social upheaval.

And then they're accused of being enemies of the state, anti-Roman, behaving in a subversive, anti-Caesar fashion, following another king, a rival, this King Jesus.

And if you look on down to verse 13, you'll see that when Paul and Silas had moved on to Berea, the next town, which was some 45 miles away, a good two days journey in terms of the geography in those days, when they'd moved on to Berea, some of the Thessalonian Jews were so angry with them that they followed them all the way to Berea, agitating further mob violence against them. So it doesn't take much imagination to picture how those Jews, the Thessalonian Jews who'd followed them to Berea, when they returned to Thessalonica, how they would have treated the newborn Christian church.

[9 : 25] So the long and short of it is that the Thessalonian church was born in a pressure cooker. Life for these newborn Christians was horrendously difficult from day one.

Now in Britain today, preaching the gospel is so different. A preacher gets invited to go off and preach for a weekend in Inverness or Dumfries or Morton and the Marsh and he puts it in his diary months in advance and then eventually the time comes and off he goes without a care in the world. It never enters his mind that the building that he's going to preach in might be attacked halfway through the service or that his car might be bombed out in the street or that he himself might be taken into a dark alley after the evening service and beaten up.

But for Paul and Silas and Timothy, going on mission in the first century AD was fraught with danger. They risked their lives week after week and what's more, they knew that their new converts were going to come under exactly the same kind of pressure and that is what we need to grasp if we're to understand why Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians.

He wrote this letter quite soon after he'd left, maybe three or four months later. What happened was that he had to leave Thessalonica because of this pressure. He was sent away to Berea.

[10 : 48] There was pressure there and he had to leave Berea again. He was then sent away by the Christians southwards down to Athens where again he spent just a short time and then he went across to Corinth and almost certainly it was from Corinth that he wrote this letter to the Thessalonians.

So let's turn back to 1 Thessalonians and we'll try and piece the story together. And we'll start by looking at chapter 2, verse 17. 1 Thessalonians 2, 17.

Page 986. So let me read chapter 2, verse 17. But since we were torn away from you brothers for a short time, in person, not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face because we wanted to come to you.

I, Paul, again and again but Satan hindered us. And doesn't that verse 17 show how much Paul loved them? Look at that verb, torn away.

He couldn't bear to leave them. He was wrenched from them. It was agony to him to be forced to leave Thessalonica. And the one thing he longed to do was to get back to them again. Verse 18.

[11 : 57] We wanted to come to you. I, Paul, again and again. That's an interesting phrase, that one, because it almost suggests that Paul's co-authors of the letter, Silas and Timothy, were a little bit more relaxed about making a return visit than Paul was.

But that Paul himself was desperate to see the Thessalonian Christians again. And then look on to chapter 3, verse 1. Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, in other words, when we could no longer bear the suspense of not being in touch with you, the suspense of having no news from you, we were willing to be left at Athens alone and we sent Timothy to you.

Why? Well, the next few verses explain and really give us the key to understanding why Paul wrote. We sent Timothy to you to establish and exhort you in your faith.

That's verse 2. And then verse 3, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we're destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has now come to pass and just as you know.

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, bear the absence of news no longer, I sent Timothy to learn about your faith for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would prove to be in vain.

[13 : 16] Now those few verses tell us why Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. But they also tell us in effect why he wrote this letter. He was concerned that these very young Christians might throw in the towel, might give up the faith because of fierce persecution.

Paul knew that those very hostile Jews, the ones who had forced him to flee from Thessalonica, he knew that they would be subjecting the young Christians to daily harassment.

Those young Christians after all, they would have been the relatives and neighbors of the folk who were persecuting them. They were all Thessalonians and it doesn't take much imagination to see what was going on.

Think of Granny and Grandpa Solomons who have, let's say, five children and fifteen grandchildren. Think of them seeing half a dozen of their family members suddenly joining the Christian church. What are they going to think about that? They would be absolutely horrified and they would send their biggest and most muscular young male relatives round to the houses of the renegades with instructions to use any type of tactics to force their relatives to drop this Christianity nonsense and return to the synagogue.

[14:30] There'd be threats and possibly violence. Now, Paul knew that this would be going on. He'd seen it so often before. He knew how Jewish families reacted when their own members became Christians.

That's why he knew how strongly some of these baby Christians would be tempted to quit their newfound faith because quitting the newfound faith would throw cousin Nathaniel off their backs with his threats to come round one evening and beat them up.

And behind the human pressure of this persecution, Paul could see the sinister pressure of Satan himself which is why he says in chapter 3 verse 5 that he fears the tempter might have tempted them to give up their faith which would mean in turn that his own labour would prove to have been in vain.

So he sent Timothy to strengthen them to encourage them to stand firm for Christ so that, verse 3, no one be moved, shifted from their ground by these afflictions.

If you like, he sent Timothy to stiffen their spines. So what happens subsequently? Well look at verse 6 in chapter 3. But now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you.

[15:51] For this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord.

In other words, all is well. My fears have proved groundless. I can live and breathe again now that I know that you are standing firm as Christians. Look at that verse 8.

Don't you think it's a terrific verse? Paul's life and happiness depend upon his knowing that these young Christians are standing firm in their faith and making progress.

That's the thing that brings him the height of joy to know that these Christians are standing firm. If you look at the values or some of the values of our society today you'd think that happiness would depend on very different things wouldn't you?

What does happiness depend upon in our society today? A person needs to be the right weight the right shape needs to have beautiful skin and hair exactly the right colour because you're worth it.

[16:56] Aren't those pathetic values?

Let's allow Paul the Apostle to re-educate us and teach us that happiness consists in seeing younger Christians standing firm for the Lord. So Paul sends Timothy to Thessalonica to establish the baby church to strengthen it to encourage it lest it should go belly up in the midst of its persecutions.

And he's writing this letter for exactly the same purpose. Timothy's short stay at Thessalonica is over he's back with Paul but Paul knows that this young church will need repeated doses of encouragement so he's writing this letter to give them further strength to their spines.

Yes, he's hoping to visit them himself again personally and you'll see he expresses that hope in chapter 3 verse 11. But in the meantime a letter written with great love and great warmth is going to be a big boost to the young church.

In this letter Paul not only encourages the Thessalonian Christians to stand firm in Christ he reminds them of his initial visit to them and he teaches them also about a number of things so as to develop their understanding of what it means to be Christians.

[18:21] He only spent a few weeks there so he teaches them a little bit about about well not only the affliction and persecution which is bound to come but in the later chapters about sexual purity about the state of those who've died as Christians about the return of the Lord Jesus and then briefly about a few other matters as well.

Now it may be that somebody here tonight is thinking well of course this letter is hardly relevant to a church like ours like St. George's Tron in 2008 I mean the Thessalonian church was very young and it was being persecuted whereas St. George's Tron is mature and is not being persecuted so there can't be much for us surely to learn from a letter like this that was written to such a different kind of church.

Well if you're thinking that let me give you two reasons why you ought to stop thinking it. First many churches in many countries today are being fiercely persecuted so churches like ours which are not being persecuted need to understand how Paul encouraged persecuted Christians so that we too can encourage our persecuted brothers and sisters.

We're part of the worldwide church we're not isolated and much of the worldwide church is under great pressure. We need to be able to feel as Paul felt for those under great persecution.

And then secondly the Thessalonian church was indeed immature and young but we're not quite as grown up as we might think. Even the ripest Christians amongst us need to keep on hearing Paul's theological and ethical teaching because if we don't keep listening to it our hearts will grow cold.

[20 : 06] We never outgrow the need to listen to any part of the Bible's teaching. If we think that we can afford to stop listening to Paul's teaching about affliction about loving younger Christians about sexual purity about death which I guess will pick off most of us sooner or later and about the return of Christ then spiritual rigor mortis is really setting into us.

We need Paul's teaching to revive our hearts to get the blood pumping around our systems again and to spur us on to roll up our sleeves in service of others both Christians and those who are lost. So this letter will be a great tonic to the soul. Each Bible book has its own flavour and fragrance and this letter is particularly sweet and encouraging to Christians to live wholeheartedly and delightedly in the Lord's service.

Well that's been a long introduction but if I can just bend your ear for a few more minutes those of you who are still awake we'll try and take in the broad sweep of chapter one. We shan't linger too much on the details but we'll just try and take in the sweep of chapter one.

Now we've seen that Paul writes the whole letter so as to establish young Christians more firmly in their faith but within that bigger purpose what is he doing in chapter one? Well in chapter one he is saying to them quite simply my beloved Thessalonians when we came to you just a few months ago you really became Christians.

[21 : 35] You were genuinely converted. That's the purpose of chapter one to assure these very young Christians that the gospel had radically altered their lives.

Now if you're a Christian I'm sure most here tonight are think back to the time of your conversion. Didn't you find in those early weeks and early months that you had moments of doubt?

You had moments of butterflies in your stomach. Yes you knew that you'd accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour. You'd capitulated. You'd submitted to him. But in those early days you looked at your life and you wondered if you really had changed.

You found yourself facing the same temptations now as you felt before and you felt weak. You didn't feel supercharged with joy or with a passion to pray or read the Bible.

So you asked yourself with some fear and trepidation has anything really happened? Am I really a Christian? Have I been born again? Have I really been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved son?

[22 : 41] I don't feel very different. Now Paul knew that this is just the kind of thing that these young Thessalonian Christians would have been experiencing. And so they needed reassurance that it wasn't all a dream.

That it wasn't just a figment of their imagination. Paul knows perfectly well that they truly have been converted not least because Timothy has just returned to him bringing the good news that they're firm in their faith.

But Paul is a wise pastor and he knows that they will still need further reassurance. He knows that the human heart is very hesitant. It's a fluttery little thing often filled with anxiety and fear.

So in chapter 1 he tells the Thessalonians that there are three obvious evidences of their real conversion. The first is that their lives are displaying faith love and hope.

Look at verse 2. He says we're so thankful to God for all of you. Why? Verse 3 because as we pray for you we remember before God I'm just going to paraphrase it a little bit so as to bring out the force of it.

[23 : 49] We remember your work produced by your faith your labour produced by your love and your steadfast solid hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words your lives right from your conversion were marked by the three great characteristics or hallmarks of the Christian life faith love and hope.

Now you'll know that Paul famously links those three together in 1 Corinthians 13 where he says so now faith hope and love abide these three but the greatest of these is love.

But Paul actually links those three together in several of his letters and that demonstrates that they are an essential element in his teaching and his understanding of the Christian life. I once heard it put like this that in the Bible there are three trinities.

There's the Holy Trinity the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit there's the wicked trinity the world, the flesh and the devil and there's the Christian trinity which is faith hope and love.

[24 : 54] Well here we have these three and says Paul the fact that your lives show them is evidence right from the start that you've been converted. If you had not been converted those things would not have appeared.

But I remember he says how your faith and love got you working and laboring. You rolled up your sleeves and got on with the Christian life actively serving God and each other.

Real Christianity always demonstrates itself in active service. in the terms of verse 3 faith makes us work and love makes us labor.

So if we love other Christians we don't sit on our bottoms in the pew and say to ourselves ooh, ah, oh I so love these Christians in this church they give me such fuzzy wuzzy feelings of joy and warmth and delight.

No. We actually shift our bottoms off the pew and we begin to serve them and labor for them. We feed them teach them encourage them spur them on occasionally with a sharp stick make them feel that the Christian life is the only way to live which indeed it is.

[26 : 01] We energize them. So in verse 3 Paul remembers their work produced by faith their labor produced by their love and the steadfastness the enduring quality of their hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

But why does real hope in Christ need to be steadfast? Well the answer is because it will often be knocked assaulted battered These Christians had their hope in Christ assaulted and battered from day one their own neighbors and relatives their fellow Thessalonians turned on them and made life very rough for them but they stood fast.

Their hope that is to say their expectation of enjoying eternal life with Christ that meant more to them than enjoying a quiet life in Thessalonica.

They were prepared to endure battering and persecution in this life because they were staking everything on the life to come which Christ had won for them. So Paul is saying I remember your faith your love and your hope.

Those characteristics would not have been displayed in you he is saying if you had not been truly converted. They are the mark of people who belong to Christ. So that is the first evidence of their conversion.

[27 : 20] Now the second evidence is that the gospel powerfully and fully convinced them. Look at the way Paul puts it in verse 4 For we know brothers loved by God that he has chosen you and you see what he is saying we know that you are truly Christians truly chosen by the Lord how?

Because of the way that you received our gospel not just in word but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. Now Paul was able to speak like this because he was such a seasoned campaigner.

He preached the gospel a thousand times and he knew very well how different people responded to it. He knew that many folk dismissed it as mere verbiage just words.

He'd often seen people turn to each other at the end of his sermon and say to each other have you any idea Alistair what that man was talking about? No Donald I haven't the foggiest.

Now that's the gospel as mere verbiage words incomprehensible to the non-Christian mind. But says Paul with you dear Thessalonians it was quite different.

[28 : 33] My gospel did not come to you in mere words but with power with the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. And how do I know it? Because you began to walk in my steps as I walk in Christ's steps.

There it is in verse 6 And you became imitators of us. This is how we know. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. How so? Because you received the word the gospel in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

What he means is that they are chips off the same block. They are products of the same mold. Christ's life was marked by affliction and joy.

The lives of Paul Silas and Timothy are marked by affliction and joy. And you Thessalonians have followed exactly the same pattern which is the pattern of authentic worldwide Christianity. He is saying the fact that your lives are exhibiting joy in the midst of your trials and persecutions and afflictions is clear evidence that you are really Christians. My dear Thessalonians he is saying have you ever met an unconverted man who is prepared to put up with affliction if he can avoid it?

[29 : 47] Of course not. It is a mark of conversion to accept the pain of persecution and to do so with joy. Now friends I know looking at us here tonight I know that most of us are not actively being persecuted for our faith but that is an oddity that is an abnormal situation.

But being a Christian will still bring us certain difficulties and stresses and labours and if we bear these with a joyful heart that too is evidence of our conversion.

So there is Paul's second ground for reassuring the Thessalonians that they really are Christians. The gospel did not bounce off them like drops raindrops bouncing off a tin roof.

It gripped them it convinced them and they followed in the steps and lifestyle of Jesus and his apostles. Afflicted yet joyful. That's Christianity afflicted yet joyful.

And then thirdly their conversion is demonstrated by the fact that they turned from idols to serve the living and true God as Paul puts it there in that wonderful and memorable verse 9.

[30 : 59] Now just see how Paul develops his thought. In verses 6 and 7 the affliction and joy of the Thessalonian Christians is noticed by other Christians around the place by the churches throughout Greece.

Macedonia was northern Greece in those days and Achaia was southern Greece. And verse 8 Paul says everybody knows about your transformed lives. The Macedonians do.

The Achaeans do. The people of Timbuktu know about it. Everywhere it's noised abroad. And what are they all saying about you? Verse 9 They tell of how you received us and our message and of how you consequently rejected your former idols so as to turn to God and serve him who is living and true unlike the idols which are lifeless and false.

Their real conversion led the Thessalonians to reject their idols to put into the wheelie bin their statues of Zeus and Apollo and Diana their little altars their sweet little totem poles and lucky charms their shark's teeth and rat's paws their crystals and rocks their horoscopes their trust in fate and destiny their touching of wood their CDs of John Lennon singing Imagine their dreamy Celtic music telling them that their spirits will find all the therapy they need through being united to the stars and trees and rocks and streams Am I getting my centuries a bit confused here?

No! It's all the same thing isn't it? All of a piece Real conversion decisively drops its idolatries its false trusts into the wheelie bin and having dropped them in it closes the lid Real conversion turns a person from all this death-dealing paraphernalia to verse 9 the living and true God and that leads us verse 10 to wait So the Christian is a gentleman or lady in waiting Now we're busy serving the Lord here and now of course we are but at the same time we're waiting for what?

[33 : 16] For whom? Well for real life Idolatry in the end can only turn us to dust but verse 10 is all about the great and real life of the great future We wait for Jesus to return from heaven Jesus who died but conquered death by his resurrection Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come For all that we wait and when it comes it will be terrific So are we Christians?

Let's test ourselves by 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 First is there a reality of faith and love and hope in our lives and do our faith love and hope show themselves in work and labour and steadfastness Second is the gospel just words to us is it rather like piped music to us just something in the background of life or is the gospel a truth that has taken us by storm gripped us filled our screen filled our vision Third have we discarded our idols the things that we once wrapped our souls around have we turned our backs on them so as to turn our faces to God to serve him who alone is living and true and are we waiting with happy anticipation for the return of Jesus who will rescue us from the inevitable wrath the wrath that will engulf the unrepentant world well if these things are true of us then we can take to our own hearts

Paul's words of reassurance to the Thessalonian Christians in verse 4 we know brothers loved by God that he has chosen you let's bow our heads and pray to him how we thank you our dear father

for these words of grace inspired by the Holy Spirit which Paul the apostle still uses to teach us today we thank you for him and his grasp of the gospel and we pray indeed dear father that for all of us who are Christian believers you will reassure our hearts from this first chapter and speak gracious words into our ear reassuring us that we truly are loved by you and chosen and we pray for any here tonight who are not yet believers and ask that in your mercy and grace you will open to them the way forward the way to repentance and the forsaking of idolatry and turning to serve the living and true

God so we thank you we trust you and we pray that our growth as Christians like that of the Thessalonians will be solid and true and progressive and all these things we ask in Jesus name
Amen