

How to Pray for Tyrants...

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Preacher: Jon Gemmell

[0 : 00] And lastly, just to very warmly welcome John Gemmill. John is preaching to us this morning, and John, some of you will know, is part of the staff at Cornhill, Scotland, and it's a great joy to have John with us this morning. So welcome, John. He's come all the way from Edinburgh this morning, and great to have you with us, John. So we look forward to hearing more from John later.

And John's going to be preaching to us from Psalm 58. So please turn your Bibles, and we will read that together. Psalm 58, I'll give you a moment to find that in your Bibles. If you're visiting here this morning, and you don't have a Bible with you, we do have Bibles at the back. So please do grab a Bible if you need one. But please turn to Psalm 58. I'm glad that John's preaching this this morning, and not me, as you'll see. But Psalm 58.

To the choir master, according to you, do not destroy a miktam of David. Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? No. In your hearts you devise wrongs. Your hands deal out violence on earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb. They go astray from birth, speaking lies. They have venom, like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ears so that it does not hear the voice of the charmers or the cunning enchanter. O God, break the teeth in their mouths. Tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord. Let them vanish like water that runs away. When he aims his arrows, let them be blunted.

Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun. Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away.

[2 : 20] May the righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance. He will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.

Mankind will say, surely there is a reward for the righteous. Surely there is a God who judges on earth. Amen. May God bless his words to us this morning.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, good morning. It is lovely to be with you at the Tron. I left Edinburgh in warm sunshine, and I got to Glasgow to receive a warm welcome.

We at Cornhill are so thankful to each of you for your astonishing generosity, through contributing to the Anesimus Fund, to be able to be able to gather to back people financially and propel them on in their training for gospel ministry.

It's just a thrilling thing to be involved in. All of you, through your generosity here at the Tron, have a stake in all that these men go on to do for the Lord Jesus through a whole career of ministry.

[3 : 35] You have been integral in enabling them to be made properly dangerous for the Lord Jesus, and then deployed into the world to preach his word and hold out the word of life in the communities and further afield where God has placed them.

So thank you all so, so much. That money will go a long way to blessing many people down the line. I am super nervous, so would you pray with me?

And then we'll get to work in Psalm 58. Thank you, Father God, that you are bigger, greater, mightier, and wiser than we could ever comprehend.

Please remind us afresh this morning of all that you are, that we might have hope forever in you. Bless us and speak to us this morning, we pray.

All for the glory of your Son. Amen. I wonder, what are the parts of the Bible that you are most embarrassed about? The parts that, when you read them, you wish they weren't included in God's word.

[4 : 51] Psalm 58, for many Anglicans, is a psalm that is so embarrassing that when they revised the common book of prayer in 1962, they removed all trace of Psalm 58.

It is not prescribed for any feast days or holy days. Even in your regular reading of the psalms, you go from Psalm 56 and 57, straight to Psalms 59, 60, and 61.

It is a psalm that I'm sure that has Paul read it out for us. At first reading, it sticks in the throat.

There is some language in here that we find deeply disturbing. And yet my hope is, as we spend time looking at it this morning, it will be deeply comforting and greatly helpful to us.

So please turn again to Psalm 58. I'll read it, and then we'll get to work. Psalm 58. Do you judge the children of man uprightly?

No. In your hearts you devise wrongs. Your hands deal out violence on earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb.

[6 : 13] They go astray from birth, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ears, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter.

O God, break the teeth in their mouths. Tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord. Let them vanish like water that runs away.

When he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun.

Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away. The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance.

He will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, surely there is a reward for the righteous. Surely there is a God who judges on earth.

[7 : 17] Bashar al-Assad. Nikolai Ceaușescu. Saddam Hussein. Idi Amin. Ayatollah Homini.

Slobodan Milosevic. Robert Mugabe. Paul Potts. Adolf Hitler. Joseph Stalin. Ruthless tyrants.

Despotic dictators. Those responsible for killing millions upon millions of people within the last century. Autocrats leading brutal regimes that oppress and obliterate any that stand in their way.

These men, and many others besides, are bloody stains on world history. Even today on our news, Vladimir Putin relentlessly and indiscriminately trampling through Ukraine.

On a misguided nationalistic conquest to reestablish the Russian Empire. Casting himself in the role of Peter the Great. Vladimir Putin ordering the shelling of schools.

[8 : 29] The targeting of hospitals. The bombing of residential areas where terrified civilians cower in fear. Vladimir Putin using the Russian war machine to constrict and slowly squeeze the life out of the nation of Ukraine.

A campaign carried out while other world leaders watch on impotently at this unfolding horror story. Listen to a paragraph I read this week from the iNewspaper about those with disabilities abandoned because of the conflict.

The author writes this on the ground. The bombs and bullets, the chaos and carnage are hard enough to bear for any human being. But imagine if the basements offering safety from lethal shells are only accessible by stairs.

The lifts have stopped working because of power cuts. And the only transport out of town is inaccessible for wheelchair users. Imagine how people feel when their precious carers flee for their lives.

Depriving them of life enabling support. Or the devastation now essential drug supplies have dried up as pharmacies close and supply lines are crushed.

[9 : 47] This brutal regime has decimated Ukraine. And left thousands of helpless, less able citizens to fend for themselves. Confronted by the fallenness of our world, personified by these seemingly untouchable dictators, we feel powerless.

Twelve points in the Eurovision is not going anywhere to help the people of Ukraine. We start asking big questions. We doubt God's sovereignty. And unfortunately, we are slowly numb to the terror of it all.

As the reports and pictures simply wash over us. All over social media for the last three months has been plastered Ukrainian flags and urgent calls to pray for Ukraine.

But our big question is, how should we pray? How should we be praying? What should we pray?

There is a constant responsibility as Christians to pray for brothers and sisters caught up in the conflict. That is true. The prayer asking that God, even in this situation, that his sovereign gospel

purposes would be carried out even in the conflict.

[11 : 09] That is true. There is the petition to God to demonstrate his compassion to people like the less able citizens of Ukraine.

To the widows and orphans and those caught up in the middle of the crisis. These are all excellent prayers to be praying for Ukraine. But what should we do with the anger that churns up inside us at every new atrocity that we see?

What do we do with that gut-wrenching feeling when they find another mass grave into which they've poured innocent civilians? Are we allowed to be angry?

What should we be praying for the Russian regime and Vladimir Putin himself? Big question, how do we pray for tyrants?

How do we pray for tyrants? Well, friends, this is where Psalm 58 is just so helpful. Into this horror show comes the clarion call of Psalm 58.

[12 : 24] Our God, in his kindness, has given us right words to speak back to him when tyrants raise their ugly heads. And all our words seem so feeble.

It is a psalm that ensures us that tyrannous injustice will ultimately be met by the perfect justice of our sovereign lords. And with that, we're comforted.

And it's also a psalm that exhorts us to pray earnestly to the Lord that judgment would fall quickly on these tyrants. As we wait for ultimate justice to ultimately be done.

So please keep Psalm 58 in front of you. I am from Edinburgh, so you will want to check that everything I say is true. And look with me at the inspired superscript of Psalm 58.

It is one of six miktams of David that we have in the Psalter. This psalm, Psalm 58, is the middle of a cluster of five. So we have these five in Book 2 of the Psalter, and we have Psalm 16 in Book 1.

[13 : 36] We're not quite sure what miktam means. Most probably it is a musical term derived from the Hebrew word for silence. Which would make sense.

These are the inner pleadings of God's fugitive king-elect David. David anointed king, but not yet king. These really are visceral prayers that you'd only actually feel comfortable praying in the silence of your own hearts.

As you gather to pray on Wednesday night. You would take real courage to pray the likes of Psalm 58 in the middle of a corporate prayer meeting. Secondly, see as well, it is to the tune of Do Not Destroy.

A seemingly very popular tune that many psalms are said to, even Psalm 57 and 59, either side, are to this famous tune. A tune seemingly synonymous with God's protection for his people.

The unifying theme of the four psalms that are set to that melody. With that orientation in place, look with me and see that the psalm splits into four movements each, where the poetry takes a different form.

[14 : 56] A psalm that teaches us how to pray for tyrants. So firstly, look with me at verses 1 and 2 and see tyrants confronted.

Tyrants confronted. David starts with two rhetorical questions in verse 1. Do you indeed decree what is right to you gods?

Do you judge? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? The phrase gods here could be referring to malignant spiritual powers.

But it is most probable, as their footnote indicates, best rendered as mighty lords. What I have chosen to call tyrants.

David, God's king elect, looks at the tyrants of the world and confronts them with accusations of their gross injustice through his rhetorical questions.

[15 : 54] Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? Let's be clear, David knew what tyrants looked like.

David at the writing of this psalm is in the crosshairs of King Saul. David's megalomaniacal, murderous intent towards David is boiling over.

He was familiar with the regime of Achish, king of the Philistines. David knew what it was like to stare down Goliath, the Philistine champion.

A man who was not just a tyrant, but he looked every bit like a tyrant. And there's little scrawny David with his slingshot.

When it came to tyrants, David was well schooled. He knew what they looked like. He was familiar with them in all their forms of the ancient world. And the answer to his rhetorical questions are that

these tyrants are not just.

[17:01] They are not upright. Their pronouncements are not just. And see verse 2. The flow is that the corruption of their hearts inspires their hands to deal out violence on the earth.

They're those who trample on the little people with seeming impunity. Taking what they want, killing who they please, and spreading their unwholesomeness further and wider across the world.

In stark contrast to leaders who choose to keep their heads down and their mouths shut. But God's anointed king elect, Jesus, to call out these tyrants.

Jesus, to look at them and say, you are not just. You are not upright. What you are doing is wrong. David is shining a light on what they are doing.

Confronting them with their corruption. Many leaders choose the course of least resistance and just kowtow to the bully on the global playground. Not God's anointed king, confident of God's sovereignty.

[18:18] Do you indeed decree what is right to you, gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? And David says, no. You don't.

You absolutely don't. So verses 1 and 2, tyrants confronted. Now see verses 3 to 5, tyrants described. If the trajectory of verse 2 was wicked hearts leading to violent hands, then verse 3 is all about wickedness from the womb, spiraling out to insidious arrogance and worldwide violence down the line.

There is a massive divide in how we think about humanity. Are humans essentially good and just, and we just need a virtuous top up from Jesus in order to get us over the line and be saved?

Or are humans wholly wicked and need a miraculous intervention from God in order to be saved?

The first view celebrating human goodness would be known in classical theology as Pelagianism.

If you need to impress people over lunch today, Pelagianism would be a good word to drop in.

Whereas the second view, that humanity is wholly corrupt, that would be called Augustinianism.

[19:49] Augustinianism. Let's be clear friends. Augustin is biblical. Augustin is biblical. The clear message of the Bible is that we are shrouded in total depravity.

There is not one iota of our being that has not been corrupted by sin. Total depravity doesn't mean that things are as bad as they could possibly be.

But it does say we're sinful to the core and we need a miraculous intervention from God in order to be turned around. So verse 3, you see, is true of all of us.

All of us are wicked from the womb. We are all potential tyrants in the making. My wife Aileen and I, we have a little son called Isaac.

He is 21 months old. He is a very sweet boy. But he has the potential to do naughty things. And I've chatted to my wife at length and none of us have taught him how to do that.

[21:00] We've not had a morning lesson in how to throw your breakfast against the kitchen wall. We've never taught him how to slap somebody around the face. And yet, all these naughty, he is a natural at it.

He is a natural at being naughty. And let me tell you, so are you. You're a natural. Our psalm is true of all of us.

We are wicked from the womb. But see how wickedness from the womb turns into tyranny. The wicked are estranged from the womb.

They go astray from birth speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ears. Our psalm says that wickedness grows into tyranny by deliberate deafness.

By deliberate deafness. The picture is of a venomous snake internally manufacturing poison on an industrial scale.

[22:04] With which to envenomate others. Yet deaf to the cries of anyone challenging them to change. They're like the black mamba who just turns up his headphones to a remarkable volume.

So that no sound can penetrate and they just keep going. On the course of action that they've decided upon. People who have become their own echo chamber.

Surrounding themselves by yes men. And untamable by even the most skillful diplomat. Or the most ingenious charmer.

They will not listen to reason. They will not listen to reason. They will not heed any warnings. There is no word of restraint. Or pleadings that will be hurt.

From people caught in the crossfire. These tyrants who were wicked from the womb. Stop their ears and they have turned into venomous.

[23 : 08] Slithering and impenetrable serpents. So hearts that devise wrong. And deal out violence with their hands in verse 2.

Start from the womb and through not listening. Set a trajectory towards tyranny. It's terrifying isn't it? How does tyranny develop?

It develops when people impudently stop listening. And most crucially stop listening to God's words. Now Scotland thankfully is still a liberal democracy.

And for that we should be thankful. But be very, very, very certain. That when leaders stop listening to God's word. They are setting a trajectory. And flirting with tyranny.

If you don't believe me. Stand up in your workplace tomorrow. And start talking about what the Bible says about human sexuality. Or gender identity.

[24 : 14] Or gender politics. And you will feel tyranny. Even on the safe streets of Scotland. Because when people stop listening. Tyranny is only round the corner.

The reference to venomous snakes and adders is not arbitrary. David is a supernaturalist. He knows behind the heinous acts of toxic tyrants.

Is the enslaving hand of the serpentine Satan himself. People blinded. Deafened and deployed. In Satan's mission to steal.

Kill. And destroy in the short time that he has left. What started with the snake saying. Did God really say in Eden. Down the line has turned into.

We don't need to listen to God anymore. He has nothing good to say. Tyranny is just Genesis 3. Spiraling down to its inevitable manifestation.

[25 : 16] Psalm 58 is deeply uncomfortable at first reading. But if we take a moment to think about it. It is remarkably clear.

Remarkably accurate. And I hope profoundly comforting. There is real honesty. And clarity in God's words.

There's no fantasy here. There's no make-belief or corporate delusion. That the world isn't corrupt and fallen. The Bible allows no glossing over evil.

But like David looks it full in the face. And there's no notion on these pages. That humanity has the answer to humanity's deep-seated wickedness.

God is not afraid to look tyranny in the face. Call it out and diagnose its abhorrence. God in his loving kindness.

[26 : 14] Has given us his people words to say back to him. When we encounter tyranny. Tyranny confronted.

Tyranny described. Tyranny. And now verses 6 to 9. Tyranny imprecated. Tyranny imprecated. Psalm 58 is one of the imprecatory psalms.

Which easily make some of us squirm. Imprecation is the act of calling down a curse. Upon God's enemies. The imprecatory psalms give us permission to be angry.

About the things that God is angry about. They give us permission to rest in his omniscience. His sovereignty and his righteousness. When we encounter humanity's worst.

These are vivid images. Painted in this movement. That each call on God to intervene against tyrants. And it is worth savoring the beauty.

[27 : 22] Of the poetry. And the sharpness. Of the supplication. Look with me at verse 6. Oh God break the teeth in their mouths. Tear out the fangs of the young lions.

Oh Lord. David is praying that these tyrants would be made toothless. That he would break and remove the most dangerous part of these tyrannical lions.

Just think of the David Attenborough documentary. On the savannah. As the lion tears across the plain.

After the young wildebeest. Yes there is astonishing power. Yes there are razor sharp claws. But what spells the end for the wildebeest?

When the lion's jaws. With its ferociously sharp teeth clamp. Around the wildebeest's neck. That is game over.

[28 : 24] That is the prayer that David prays for these tyrants. David remove their most deadly weapons. Render them toothless. Render them impotent. I think the significance of young lions.

Is that young lions will kill anything for sport. But old lions. Who are tired and literally long in the tooth. Only kill things to eat them. Killing for sports.

A devastating description. Of what motivates tyrants. Verse 7a is a request. That they would vanish like a bucket of water.

Slopped onto the pavement. In the hot near east. Lord would these tyrants be like a fleeting puddle. That is their one minute.

And then evaporation dissipates. Any memory that the water was ever there. God may you show that they're temporary. May you show that these seemingly untoppable dictators.

[29 : 31] Are temporary when they come up against. The God of the cosmos. This turns into a prayer that their arrows would be blunted.

End of verse 7. When he aims his arrows. Let them be blunted. It's an ingenious request. Blunt arrows are deficient in two ways.

Firstly they don't fly straight. And they often fall short. They go wonky and never hit their targets. What a great prayer.

May the Russian missiles. And the Russian bombs malfunction. Function. Also blunt arrows. Even if they do go somewhere. Get to their target. And because they're blunt. They don't do the same amount of damage as sharp arrows. Prayers that the weapons of war.

[30 : 31] Would not work in the hands of the tyrant. And then verse 7. 8. Age is just so vivid. Isn't it? Let them be like a snail that dissolves in its own slime.

I think the image here is of the tyrant succumbing to his own ambition. Movement for a snail is dangerous business. As the slime trail is the snail losing valuable moisture.

As well as it's eroding its mucus foot undercarriage. So if the snail has ideas above its station. And wanders too fast too far.

It will in fact die. It will become a desiccated snail. Whose mucus foot has been lethally eroded. God may these tyrants.

Go too fast too quickly. Overextend themselves and come to nothing. Hoisted on their own ambition. Dissolving themselves.

[31 : 38] In their own toxic plants. Verse 8b I'm sure as we read it. It's probably the most penetrating. Of David's petitions.

Like a stillborn child. Who never sees the sun. Being so angry. About the work of these tyrants. That David says I wish they'd never been born. Being angry about what God is angry about. And using the words that God has graciously given us.

To pour that anger back. To the God who hears. Jesus. These imprecatory statements come into land in verse 9.

The Hebrew is quite hard to translate. But I think the sense of it is very easy. God would you intervene quicker. Would you intervene quicker in time.

[32 : 40] Than it takes the heat of a fire. To warm the pot. God. Would you do something soon. Would you intervene quickly. Would you bring all of these petitions to bear.

In the near future. So in summary. When confronting tyranny. David makes a multifaceted request to God. God render them toothless.

So they can't hurt people anymore. God may they evaporate. And be shown to be temporary. God may their weapons malfunction. And their intents be thwarted. God may they overstretch themselves.

To the point that they dissolve in their own ambition. God I am so angry about this. That I wish they had never been born. God sweep them away in judgment.

As quickly as possible. God. There's comfort here I think. That no matter how untouchable a tyrant may seem.

[33 : 38] No matter how inept. Humanity seems in toppling them. There is sitting above it all the sovereign Lord. Who turns his listening ear towards his people.

Who cry to him for justice. And are as angry about tyrants. As he himself is. There are many times when getting angry is sinful.

But equally there are occasions when not getting angry. Is sinful. And Psalm 58 reminds us. Reminds us. Of one such situation.

The psalm finishes with the future hope of the psalmist. That sees tyrants judged. Tyrants judged. See how this section is all future.

Will rejoice. Will bathe. Will say. All looking forward to a day when perfect justice will be done.
[34 : 40] By the righteous judge of all the earth. Again David uses vivid language of bathing in blood. And rejoicing at seeing vengeance enacted.

This is right though. Isn't it? When your feet are paddling in the blood of your tyrannical oppressor. You know it's over.

You know tyranny is over. That's the moment you know we'll never be. Under the heel of that tyrant again. Similar in movies when somebody gets shot.

How do you know when they're really dead? Because their blood pools around them. And you know that's them exiting stage left from the script of the movie. The day Vladimir Putin is defeated.

And the Russian war machine is thrown out to Ukraine. Thrown out of Ukraine. That will be a joyous day. For the Ukrainian in a wheelchair who has spent six months suffering alone.

[35 : 40] Camping in the corridor of their flat complex. Away from every exterior wall. Just think of the jubilation when Saddam was ousted from power in Iraq.

Thousands of people teeming into Farad Square. To hit his toppled statue with their shoe. People who would never even dare sit on the plinth of that statue.

When Saddam was in power. But once he was toppled and their newfound freedom. It was rejoicing time. That's the picture of verses 10 and 11.

David looks forward to a day when God will enact final justice. And all earthly dictators will be toppled forever.

The day that will make any prior liberation celebration in history look like a sad office birthday party. When the Lord Jesus comes and judges and rules and reigns.

[36 : 42] And tyranny is a thing of the past. However I think for us Psalm 58 is now even more helpful. Orientating and comforting for us.

This side of the life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the big deficiencies in the Old Testament is that David wasn't really David.

David said loads of things but was powerless to enact the things that he said. However, David's greatest son was really David.

David's greatest son was really the David we need. Who didn't just write moving stanzas about the God of justice. But sovereignly secured that the God of justice would win forever.

This psalm could mount perfectly onto Jesus' experience. He stared down the tyranny of stiff-necked Jewish religious leaders.

[37 : 48] And their tyrannical grip over God's Old Testament people. He looked the Roman Empire full in the face. He felt the ultimate snake-like venomous assault of not just an earthly tyrant.

But of the tyrants of tyrants and the Satan himself. Jesus knew what it was to be falsely accused to be spoken lies against.

He knew what it was to be denied any semblance of justice at the expediency of his enemies. He felt the full force of wicked hearts raining down violent hands upon him at the cross.

And therefore this morning, friends, Jesus is the one who ensures that verses 10 and 11 are not just a fanciful pipe dream of a long-forgotten sovereign from 3,000 years ago.

But for us are the sure and certain promise of God that will soon be realized that when Jesus comes back, it will be justice and righteousness forever, always, everywhere.

[39 : 00] A promise that will bring an end to all tyranny forever and a perfect kingdom of absolute righteousness. Jesus is the one who ensures their fleetingness, who has disarmed them of any ultimate power, who guarantees their dissolution and will soon sweep them away in judgment when he returns.

We get a picture of this in Psalm 2. When all the tyrants of the earth rally together to wage war against God and his anointed. And God in heaven laughs.

And we look at the battlefield and there are all the tyrants, but the only weapons they've got are a royal dalton tea set. And God's warrior forever has a crowbar. And it's going to be an absolute massacre because Jesus will win and righteousness will win and his kingdom will be established.

Let's be clear. Tyrants are not just present on a global stage. Tyrants rise up in families, in organizations, in churches, in all realms of life.

And Psalm 58 is here to strengthen us and say it won't always be this way. It won't always be the dog with the biggest teeth gets the biggest dinners. So friends, how do you pray for tyrants?

[40 : 30] I think Psalm 58 is a good place to start. A psalm that ensures us that tyrannical injustice will ultimately be met by the perfect justice of our sovereign Lord. And encourages us to pray earnestly to the Lord that judgment would fall quickly on tyrants.

And assures us that God's ultimate justice will ultimately be done in the Lord Jesus. This, friends, is our prayer and our sure and certain hope this day and every day.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Almighty Lord, ruler of heaven and earth and the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We come to you this morning to take comfort in your righteousness, to rest in your perfection and orientate ourselves again under your sovereign control and care. We thank you for the richness, truthfulness and clarity of your words.

Thank you for giving us words to help us speak to you about the seemingly insurmountable problems in our world. So, Father, we pray for the country of Ukraine today.

[41 : 45] We pray that you would comfort brokenhearted people, strengthen those that are weak, protect the vulnerable and place, bless the peacemakers seeking to make a difference.

God, please, would you dissolve the power of Russian tyranny? Would you defang the mouth of President Putin? And cause their weapons to malfunction always?

Please, Lord, bring your judgment and your justice to this situation. And please do it soon. Father, we thank you that we know the end of the story of this creation. Thank you that wickedness doesn't win.

Thank you that Jesus has conquered and his kingdom of perfect justice and pure righteousness is waiting to come down and fill the earth. So, Father, keep us prayerful in the present, trusting amidst the tyranny and steadfastly hopeful about the future.

And we pray this all in the name of Jesus, our perfect king forever. Amen. Amen.