

The Precious Seed Laid On the Altar

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[0 : 00] Good. Well, now we turn to our Bible reading. And if you'd like to turn to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we're reading from chapter 22. Our senior minister, Willie Philip, is continuing his series of sermons in the book of Genesis. And today we have chapter 22 verses 1 to 19. And the title of the sermon, which we'll hear later, is The Precious Seed Laid on the Altar. So Genesis 22 verse 1. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham. And he said, here am I. He said, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son, Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day,

Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, stay here with the donkey. I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac, his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father, Abraham, my father. And he said, here am I, my son. He said, behold, the fire and the wood. But where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. And he said, here am I. He said, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place. The Lord will provide as it is said to this day on the Mount of the Lord, it shall be provided. And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, by myself, I have sworn declares the Lord because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son. I will surely bless you. And I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.

And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because you have obeyed my voice. So Abraham returned to his young men and they arose and went together to Beersheba and Abraham lived at Beersheba. Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing to us today.

[4 : 23] Amen. We'll do turn with me to the passage that we read together in Genesis chapter 22.

And with this chapter really we come to the climax of the story of Abraham's faith. You'll see at the end of chapter 22 there the genealogy of Abraham's brother. It acts as an end a bracket. It matches the genealogy of Abraham's father right at the very beginning of Abraham's story at the very end of Genesis chapter 11. And then after this in chapters 23 to 25 we have the transition to the story of Isaac and of his progeny. But it's here really in this intense high point of chapter 22 that we discover how all God's promises first made to Abraham all these years earlier how they are guaranteed unreservedly by the sworn oath of God himself. And it comes through the obedience on the mantle of the Lord of God's servant where he endures what we would have to say is the ultimate test. It's really one of the most dramatic chapters in the whole Bible. And as well as drama it's full of rich and poignant associations and full of insights into the wonder of the gospel of God.

We've seen how already in the events surrounding the birth of Isaac we've seen the beginning of God's redeeming patterns at work. Even then way way back in history we've seen the promised seed who brings delight by his birth but who also is the persecuted seed who brings division through his life.

But he's also one whose birth is a powerful birth. We saw last time he brings peace with pagan kings through his birth. But here at the climax of Abraham's journey of faith we see I think most tellingly of all most strangely of all even most shockingly of all we see the precious seed the precious only beloved son laid on the altar of God. Verse 1 after these things God tested Abraham. And this is a story really which reverberates all down through the history of redemption. So I want to look at it this morning in the light of that. First of all I want to look at the story itself as it unfolds. And it's a story where we see God's servant in the crucible of suffering. A patriarch in the crucible. It's an exquisite narrative really and it's written in such a way as to magnify the drama for us. It's a literary masterpiece really. You may not notice all the devices that are used but it nevertheless has great effect. There's parallelism if you look carefully in the structure. It begins and ends with God's word. It begins with God's command his ultimate command and it ends with his promise his ultimate promise. And in between we have Abraham's response to God's command then we have God's response to Abraham's obedience. It's a parallel structure. Three times in the story we hear [7 : 54] Abraham's name being called out. And three times Abraham answers here am I. And each time it cranks up the tension and the last voice from God of course brings the climax. God has not given us a textbook of theology as his word. He's not given us a book of abstract theories. Thank God for that.

He's given us a Bible. He's given us a book full of real encounters of real people with the real and living God. And that's why the Bible touches not just our minds but our hearts. That's why it challenges our wills. And a chapter like this speaks to us on so many different levels because God speaks to us as real people. As living breathing people not as machines. So let's get a feel then for this for this drama. I reckon there's actually about 12 separate scenes in these 19 verses but let's be let's just try and group them into four. We'll think about Abraham's test followed by Abraham's trust and then God's provision followed by God's promise. First of all verses 1 and 2 talk about Abraham's agonizing test.

After these things God tested Abraham. After all that had gone before and particularly after that last verse of chapter 21 where Abraham you'll see at last was living in peace and quiet in the land of promise with his family and with his son. Isaac is growing up. Everything at long long last seems to be as it should be. And then suddenly there's a shattering of that peace.

And for one thing that tells us that any idea that we will somehow get to a golden time of trouble-free and test-free discipleship in our lives that just doesn't seem to be something that's in God's repertoire. At least not in the Bible. God will not let Abraham go into spiritual retirement. And he doesn't want you to go into spiritual retirement either. The Christian life isn't superannuated like that. And it was God here wasn't it who stepped in to shatter Abraham's peace to test him says verse 1. Now by the way that's for us to know isn't it this test that's so that we read the story properly. Abraham didn't know that. God didn't say I'm testing you Abraham. And Abraham didn't say oh yes here comes a test from God. Not at all. When he heard the word Abraham called out and said here am I he had no idea what was coming none at all. And in fact what he did here must have been agonizing for him and mystifying. Derek Kidner says Abraham's trust was to be weighed in the balance against common sense, human affection, and lifelong ambition. In fact against everything earthly.

[10 : 54] But you see it was more even than that wasn't it? Because his whole life's purpose was tied up in the precious seed in his son Isaac. And in fact his whole spiritual future was tied up with Isaac.

And indeed he'd been told by God the future of the whole world was tied up in his son Isaac. And everything that God had revealed to him. And he believed what God had revealed to him. So what on earth could God mean? Go and put an end to Isaac's life. It was against not just earthly reason but apparently the heavenly reason that God had revealed to him. And it was agonizing for Abraham.

And that's emphasized isn't it in verse 2 by the very way that God says these words. Your son. Your only son. Isaac. His very name remember means joy and delight. Whom you love.

And go and offer him as a burnt offering. Now all of Moses first hearers knew only too well that a burnt offering had a double reference. It was on the one hand an offering that signified your total giving of yourself wholeheartedly to God. But on the other hand you could do so because the victim was slaughtered to remove the offense of your sin. So you could have that fellowship with God. And the Israelites knew that in a strange way somehow God did require from them every firstborn male. Every firstborn male was to be set apart as an offering to God. Every firstborn animal was. [12:37] You can read that in Exodus chapter 13. So somehow they knew that full fellowship with God demanded that their firstborn's life belonged to him. But of course they also knew that God absolutely abhorred the taking of human life. They knew fine well that God never actually wanted them to offer their firstborn in that way. They were to redeem their firstborn sons with the life of an animal.

Child sacrifice in particular was an absolute abomination to God. So anybody listening to Moses speaking of this would be absolutely shocked, would be perplexed at what God is seeing. Just as we are at the very thought of sacrificing his son. And this is not just any son, remember. This is Isaac. This is the long-awaited child of promise. This is the one upon the whole future of God's salvation depended in its entirety. How could this happen? Surely God's whole plan would be defeated were this to happen. Well, that must have been the kind of thought that was filling Abraham's mind and his emotions too. It was agonizing. But notice how the writer doesn't mention anything about Abraham's thoughts or his feelings. What he does focus on in verses 3 to 10 is squarely on Abraham's absolute trust. Verse 3, so Abraham arose and went to the place that God had told him. It's a perfect echo there of God's first call to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 where God said, go, go, and Abraham went. It's in the other place in the Bible where that same language exactly is used.

That was also an agonizing command, wasn't it? To leave everything in his life and to go and trust God. And here, even more agonizing, he's commanded to go and sacrifice his only beloved, long-awaited son. But we're told Abraham went early in the morning. Often, almost sounds as if it's easy, doesn't it? Oh, Abraham just went. It wasn't easy. And the story builds up that dramatic tension.

Verses 3 to 6, the emphasis is on this looming sacrifice, isn't it? Abraham took Isaac, verse 3, and he cut the wood for the burnt offering. And they went for three days' journey. Three days of a father's silent pain, contemplating the sacrifice of his precious and only son. Three days bearing deep darkness of death in the heart of this father.

And then verse 6, he takes the wood and he lays it on his son. And he watches as his own son carries the wood and the means of his own sacrificial death on his back up the hill to the place of death.

[15:51] They're haunting echoes, aren't they? And verse 6, and he took in his hand, in the father's own hand, the fire and the knife.

And they went, both of them together. You can feel the agony, can't you? And then in verse 9, you see, it almost all goes into slow motion.

Let me read it again, a little more literally. And they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order.

And he bound Isaac, his son. And he laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham reached out his hand and he took the knife to slaughter his son.

It's full of the most intense emotion, isn't it? Agony. And yet the emphasis is not on what Abraham felt, but on what Abraham did. He obeyed God.

[16:53] Because what matters most is not what we feel about God's commands, but what we do in response to God's commands. As William Steele put it, not that these heartbreaking sensitivities don't matter, but that something matters more, the will of God.

The will of God is paramount in our lives, although God may rack us with pain, and very likely he will at some points. We will bear it and obey. And Abraham obeyed God's word.

Even when to obey was an agony of darkness and mystery and apparent utter folly and absurdity. How could he do that?

Well, look at verses 7 and 8, because in a way that's the centerpiece. That's the key to everything. He obeyed God's word, you see, because he trusted absolutely in God's character.

He was sure of the God that he worshipped. See, that second call to Abraham in verse 7 is deeply poignant, isn't it? He hears his name again, except this time it's even more intimate.

[18:03] My father. Here am I, my son, he says. How did the voice of the son sign, do you think? Was it innocent ignorance?

Or was there a sense of foreboding? Where is this lamb for the burnt offering? It was a piercing question, wasn't it, for Abraham? And yet Abraham's reply reveals, doesn't it, his absolute trust in God that was a source of his obedience.

God himself will provide the lamb, my son. Abraham trusted absolutely in his God, even in the dark, even in the mystery and the agony. What did he mean by that in his answer?

Well, surely either he meant that God would, at the last, provide a substitute for the offering so that he could offer a burnt offering to God and devote himself wholly to him without the loss of Isaac.

Or, that even if God didn't do that, that he would and he could bring Isaac back to life. Isaac's birth was a miracle, bringing life from the dead, wasn't it?

[19:16] And he reckoned that God could do so again. That's, I think, implied, actually, in verse 5. Do you see? Notice he says to his men that, we'll both go to worship and we will come to you again, I and the boy.

And actually, that's made explicit in Hebrews chapter 11, where we're told that he considered that God was able to raise Isaac even from the dead. See, Abraham obeyed God because he trusted God's promise absolutely.

And therefore, he trusted in God's provision and his power to keep that promise. In other words, even death cannot stop the promise of God. And he trusted so absolutely that despite the agony, Hebrews 11 says, he was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

And that, friends, is what the Bible calls the obedience of faith. And just like in the story of Job, God's trust in Abraham, his servant, was fully vindicated here.

He knows that Abraham's faith is no spurious good times only faith. It's no shallow faith. It's no feel-good worship experience. It is real and absolute trust.

[20:41] As someone has said, what God wants is not the effervescence of our emotions, but the obedience of our hearts. And that's what God saw that day in Abraham, on Mount Moriah.

Verse 10, Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But, verse 11, for a third time, Abraham hears his voice, his name.

Abraham, Abraham. Here am I, he says. And you see, verses 11 to 14 show that Abraham's trust in his God is absolutely vindicated.

Because these verses speak, don't they, of God's amazing provision. You've done enough, says the Lord. Verse 12, Now I know all that I need to know about your heart.

That you really do fear me. That you do take me seriously. That you really do love and cherish me above all things on this earth. People sometimes say, you know, God knows everything.

[21:48] God knew Abraham's heart anyway. He could have just said, I know that if I test Abraham, Abraham will obey me. That'll be enough. But you see, if we actually take the Bible seriously, that isn't actually enough for God.

God doesn't say, oh, it's the thought that really counts. And actually, when you think about it, we don't say that either, do we? Ladies, if you say to your husband, you never give me any compliments.

If he says, well, I think about it often enough. Isn't that enough? It's the thought that counts. Is that enough? That doesn't make it okay, does it? Well, it's the same with God. You see, God doesn't want people who think that they would trust him in a test, who think that they'll stand for him when the chips are down.

God wants people who actually do, do that. He doesn't want people who think about serving the Lord, who think about being generous to the Lord's people, who think about being generous to the work of the gospel.

He wants people who actually do those things. See, real faith in the Bible is a visible thing. It's a tangible thing. It's a real thing. And that's why in his gospel, Paul calls saving faith, real saving faith, the obedience of faith.

[23:03] He doesn't call it the idea of faith, or the thinking of faith, or the feeling of faith. Not the effervescence of our emotions, but the obedience of our hearts.

It's the doers of God's law who'll be justified, he says. Not just the hearers. Jesus said, it's not Lord, Lord saying it, but doing the will of God that matters.

The apostle James says the same thing. He quotes this very chapter, doesn't he? Abraham was justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar. Faith was completed in his works, and the scripture was fulfilled.

It says Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Was that because of Abraham's merit? Of course not. But because of his faith, he believed God with the obedience of real faith.

God knew that he believed him because he saw that he obeyed him. God saw his faith when he saw Abraham truly worshipping.

[24 : 12] I and the boy will go there to worship. Isn't verse 5 very striking when he talks about that? Because think of all the nonsense that people say about worship today.

Well, what was worship to Abraham? Abraham understood that worship is giving over to death on God's altar the dearest things of our hearts in the faith and in the trust that God will bring a true resurrection of new life through the deaths that we offer to him in obedience to his commands. And where faith is real, you see, where there is trust in God and his promise, then there is real provision. Verse 13, the Lord did provide the lamb and the substitute so that Abraham might indeed have faith and fellowship with God through the shedding of blood.

Yes, but the blood of God's provision, not Abraham's. And so verse 14, you see, to this day, Moses' readers and many more generations would say, on the mountain of the Lord, it shall be provided or the Lord will see to it.

On Mount Moriah, Mount Jerusalem, where centuries later, of course, Solomon would build the temple, the place of sacrifice, the place of God's provision for sin, God's amazing provision.

[25 : 40] And the final call to Abraham, you see, brings the story to its climax in verses 15 to 19 in God's absolute promise. Because you have done this and not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, says the Lord.

I swear it by myself. This is even greater than a covenant promise. It's a double promise. It's a covenant and an oath. It is an absolute promise, sealed forever.

Nothing can ever negate it. Hebrews 6 says, when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise, the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath. So that by two unchangeable things in which it's impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to him for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

because you have done this. Because, verse 18, you obeyed my voice. And that's God's reward for Abraham's costly obedience and trust.

[26 : 53] Not a reward of merit, but a reward of faith. Because the God who delights in the obedience of real faith delights to reward those who seek him.

That's what Hebrews 11, verse 6 says. That's what pleases God. To see real faith and to reward real faith. And what Genesis 22, he is telling us in a very real way is that by the obedient trust of this one man, the blessings of salvation came at last as God had promised to all the nations of the earth.

By the obedience of one, the many will be made righteous. A patriarch in the crucible, a glorious outcome. A glorious outcome.

Abraham's agonizing test, and yet his absolute trust led to God's amazing provision and his ultimate promise of blessing for the whole world. But you see, this story is glorious above all because it's more than just history, isn't it?

It's prophecy. prophecy. Because in this passage, we have not just the story of a patriarch in the crucible, but we have a picture. We have a picture of the Christ.

[28 : 12] We've already noticed, haven't we, how that pattern echoes down the centuries of the story of God's promise, the promise of the seed. And we've seen how it casts shadows all the way backwards through history from the great climax of the story, which is the coming of our Lord Jesus himself, the Christ.

You know, when you read through a story, very often when you read the first time, you don't notice all the echoes, all the hints the first time. But the second time and further times you read it, you see more and more every time.

I always find that with the Narnia stories. Every time I read them, I see something I hadn't seen before, something that echoes something greater. Well, it's that way with the Bible you see. And when you've read the story, when you read it again in the light of the end, when you know the whole

story, we always see so, so much more.

And we can't read this story, can we, without recalling Jesus' own words. John chapter 8, that Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. Indeed, he saw it and was glad.

Or what Paul says in Galatians about God having preached the gospel in advance to Abraham. Or what Hebrews tells us about what Abraham's faith was fixed on.

[29 : 24] Resurrection. hope. And you see, when you read this story sensitively, it's not hard to realize, is it, that in this agonizing experience, God wasn't just testing Abraham.

He was whispering to him how it was all going to come to pass that his seed would become such a blessing to the world. Because God's acting it all out.

He's sharing it with his friend Abraham in his own personal experience. You just can't read this story, can you? Not hear the whispers of another man obediently setting his face towards Jerusalem, the mount of sacrifice, in absolute trust in his God.

Or of another beloved, only son carrying the wood of his own cross up the hill to the place of death. or of the one who cried out, my father, may this death be taken from me.

And yet, who bowed obediently to his father's will to be an offering for the sins of the world.

Because in his place, there was no substitute. He was the lamb.

[30 : 37] Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And you can't read, can you, of Abraham and the grieving, heartbroken father after three terrible days contemplating the death of his son as an offering and as a sacrifice.

As Hebrews chapter 11 says, receiving back his son from death. You can't think of that without thinking of the joyous resurrection of Jesus on the third day, by the way, according to the scriptures. And of the father and the son gone together in perfect harmony to that mountain of sacrifice. But now reunited in the joy of resurrection life forever.

Why do you think these words in verse 12 are so laden with acclaim for this man Abraham? Seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son.

Well, because surely in Abraham's heart, God had seen the reflection of his own heart and his own love and the supreme gift of his own son, his only son, his beloved son.

[31 : 49] So that, as we sang, whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. See, in Abraham's agony is a revelation both to him and to us of the glory of the cross of Jesus.

It's a picture, it's a prophecy of the Christ himself. And moreover, it's a picture of the cost to God the Father of he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all.

Abraham saw my day, said Jesus. In a sense, he lived it out, didn't he, in shadow, a pale shadow but painfully real.

He saw it and was glad even though perhaps no man on earth before or since has ever felt or expressed so keenly or so deeply what the day of Christ would truly mean for God the Father who did not withhold his own, his only son, his beloved son.

Abraham saw the pain of redemption for the Father and for the beloved son. And he saw the provision of God's redemption in the Lamb that God himself provided. And he saw the power of God's redemption, of the God who gave back from the dead as it were through his inviolable promise.

[33 : 18] But perhaps above all he saw the pattern of God's redemption that the way to life is through death. That whosoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it said Jesus.

And that brings us just to the final thing because perhaps this is the most important thing for all of us today. You see this story is not just history of a patriarch in the crucible of suffering.

nor is it just prophetic as a picture of the Christ in history. This story is personal gospel for every one of us. This story is a pattern for the church in every age.

Because you see the Bible makes clear that the pattern of the truly redeemed will always reflect the pattern of the true redeemer. that we who are in Christ who are Abraham's seed are heirs of that same promise the ultimate promise because we are united forever to a crucified and risen Savior.

What does that mean for us? Well I think at least three things. First it means we can have great confidence in what God has done for us. Great confidence.

[34 : 39] often Christians live with fear live with a lack of assurance and wonder will I really at the last be able to stand before God? Can I really be right with God?

Can God really accept somebody like me? And the answer friends is yes because God provided the sacrifice and because God promised his blessing to all who are in Christ who are heirs of that promise to Abraham.

And because of that look at verse 17 he is saying to you that you as Abraham's offspring will possess the gate of your enemies. You will possess victory over every enemy over every sin over all guilt over all failure over everything that would keep you from the father's house.

And he has guaranteed it by an oath in which it is impossible for God to lie. And when you feel sometimes that you are being sorely tested yourself you can trust him as Abraham did.

But he who did not spare his own son says Paul but gave him up for you will he not give you all things? Yes he will.

[35 : 56] We can have confidence in the gospel of Christ. Utter assurance for the future. Secondly we can have great comfort in what God is doing in us now in the present especially in the midst of real trials and struggles and apparent agonies of testing.

The apostle says those the Lord loves he disciplines. You see to be in the crucible of suffering and of testing that is to be in the place where God himself is most intimately involved with us in our lives. because that's where we are most closely united to the pattern of his son his only son whom he loves. If that's what you feel you're going through in your life just now then be comforted.

God's not playing with your life but he is shaping it wonderfully into the pattern of his only son just as he did with Abraham to draw out to the utmost your faith and trust and to make you more like the Lord Jesus and that's what he wants for your life and Paul says he who began that good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

That doesn't take the pain away of course in the midst of that agony when you're in the crucible with God but what a comfort he's at work in us even as he at work for us.

[37 : 34] But finally also there is for us a challenge a great challenge God said to Abraham because you have done this and not withheld your son your only son I will surely bless you and bless the world through you.

See for God to bless you so that your life becomes a fountain of blessing for others that doesn't come just out of wishful thinking. It doesn't flood out of exciting ecstatic experiences of worship or anything else.

That flows out of lives of real worship. Out of lives that are marked by the same costly obedience of true faith. When Abraham said I shall go to worship what he meant was he was going to lay everything that was most precious about his life and his future and everything and going to lay it on the altar of God and consecrate it to death in obedience to God's command.

It's interesting you know that when an older generation talked about worship they used that word consecration they talked about laying their lives on the altar to God.

I would never hear that these days. What I do hear when people talk about worship is the word celebration not costly consecration and maybe that's why when you're wondering about who you can really rely on for committed service to the church for tireless service especially when it's unseen and unsung things you're much more likely to think of people over 70 than under 40 because they understood like Abraham that real worship costs.

[39 : 42] Remember what David said centuries later? I will not offer to the Lord my God that which costs me nothing. And we need that challenge today friends I think to recover that understanding of true living sacrifice as Paul calls it real worship because the life of real fruitfulness the life through which God's blessings flows out to others that is a life that is given over to death that is a life lived willingly in true worship on the altar of God and what this story shows us so clearly as one writer puts it is a permanent principle in spiritual life the law one might say of spiritual harvest all the lives that have ever blessed men and lives in which their obedience to God has borne the marks of sacrifice on the altar well apostle Paul says these things written in former days are written for us to give us great confidence yes in Christ's provision for us and to give us a great comfort in what God is doing in us that too but also also to give us a great challenge because the call of Christ is the call to follow the precious seed whose life was laid on the altar and whose death worked life for the world and when we follow in that way what we find is that that way is still the only way the only way of blessing the only way of true spiritual destiny amen let's pray together oh love that will not let me go

I rest my weary soul in thee I give thee back the life I owe that in thine oath and depths its flow may richer and fuller be oh cross that lift us up my head I dare not ask to fly from thee I lay in dust life's

glory dead and from the ground there blossoms red life that shall endless be give us hearts oh God
our father to walk with you this way all the days of our lives for Christ your son's sake amen amen
amen amen amen amen amen amen loving amen