

Doubt and Defiance

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Date: 11 February 2024

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[0 : 00] So we're going to turn to God's Word now. Do please grab a Bible and turn to Luke's Gospel. Luke's Gospel chapter 7. And we're going to be looking at this passage later.

Josh Johnston is going to be preaching to us. A section in Luke 7 all about doubt and defiance. Doubt and defiance. So let's read together the Word of the Lord. Luke chapter 7. And we begin reading verse 18.

Hear the Word of the Lord. The disciples of John reported all these things to him.

And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent to the Lord, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

[1 : 06] And when the men had come to him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits. And on many who were blind he bestowed sight.

And he answered them, Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed.

And the deaf hear. The dead are raised up. The poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see?

[2 : 05] A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in king's courts.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written.

Behold, I will send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John.

Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him. To what then shall I compare the people of this generation?

[3 : 19] And what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace, and calling to one another. We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

We sang a dirge, and you did not weep. For John the Baptist has come, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you see he has a demon.

The Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and you see, look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Yet wisdom is justified by all her children. Amen. And may God bless to us this, his words. Well, do you open your Bibles once again to Luke chapter 7, and follow along.

What will you do when God's word and salvation do not match up to your expectations? What will you do when Jesus says to you, no, I won't fit into your box.

[4 : 38] You must trust and follow me, my way. Our passage this evening shows us Jesus confronting two responses to his word and salvation.

One is genuine doubt, which Jesus deals with, showing compassion and patience, speaking words of reassurance. And the other is of grim defiance, which Jesus deals with in a cutting and pointed manner.

speaking words of rebuke. Well, last week, we saw Luke picturing for us a wonderful salvation, rescue from the curse of death.

But he also pictured for us how such salvation is taken hold of, giving us two living illustrations, one of real faith and one of sovereign grace. real faith, and real faith, we were saying, both understands one's predicament, one's need, but also then responds by throwing oneself upon the word of God, trusting it.

That was what the centurion did at the start of chapter seven. I'm not worthy, he said. But he also recognized that Jesus' word was as good as his presence, and that that was what he needed.

[5 : 55] And so we've seen real and genuine faith, the like of which was not seen in Israel, seven verse nine. But now in our passage, we see two other responses to God's word.

The first, perhaps, is initially surprising. John the Baptist raises genuine doubt. And secondly, we see those who harden themselves to salvation because it isn't quite what they want.

And so firstly, in our passage, we see Jesus' reassurance for doubting faith in verses 18 to 23. Jesus' reassurance for doubting faith.

In the midst of real and anguished doubt, we can look to all that Jesus has already done as evidence that he will fulfill all that has been spoken of him.

Verse 18, John the Baptist has heard of the many things that Jesus was doing, how his ministry was being carried out as he moved around preaching the good news of the victory of his kingdom.

[6 : 59] So John's aware of the kinds of things Jesus is doing. Verse 19, nonetheless, he summons two of his own disciples to go to Jesus with a question.

John, of course, couldn't go by himself. Herod had thrown him into prison back in 320. And look at the question that John asks. Verse 19, are you the one who is to come?

Or shall we look for another? The coming one, the one who is to come, is a way of saying, are you the promised Messiah? Are you the Christ?

It picks up language from various prophetic books. I can see it clearly in Malachi chapter 3, verse 1, which says, Behold, I send my messenger and he'll prepare the way before me.

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

[8 : 03] So John asks, are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? Are you the promised Messiah? I wonder what your first impression of that question is.

Here was John the Baptist who has been shown to us as the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. John who preached a baptism of repentance in order for people to receive the salvation offered through the arrival of God himself.

John who had witnessed God's spirit descending from heaven and resting upon Jesus in bodily form. John who had heard a voice from heaven declare that Jesus was the son of God.

And then we have this question. Was I wrong? Are you the coming one? Have we been looking in the wrong place?

Should we be looking for someone else? At this point, some commentators give John a very hard time for questioning Jesus. Others refuse to comprehend or accept that John could be questioning Jesus at all and that really John was just trying to teach his disciples.

[9 : 09] It was a lesson for them. But I think given the placement of it here by Luke alongside unbelief that Jesus rebukes, I think it makes most sense that this is a genuine question by John.

Remember, at this point John is rotting in prison because he was faithfully ministering. I'd be a little surprised in such circumstances that that question wouldn't be provoked.

And actually, his question isn't altogether ridiculous. Jewish expectation around a savior seemed to include a kind of political revolution, the overthrow and judgment of the establishment who were oppressing God's chosen people.

Back in chapter 3, Luke showed us various people repenting, indeed repenting, in response to John's ministry. But in chapter 3, the first time we see repentance in Luke's gospel, we see the crowds responding to Jesus, then the tax collectors and soldiers.

And I wonder if that was Luke at the start of his gospel wanting his readers to grasp that the scope of Jesus' arrival, the scope of the salvation of God isn't merely some political revolution.

[10 : 27] And so he's showing soldiers, not routed and retreating and defeat, but repenting. And at the very end of Luke's gospel on the route to Emmaus, the disappointment of the disciples whom Jesus meets seems to stem from the fact that Jesus died and yet Rome was not overthrown.

And so with that kind of expectation in mind, when it hasn't seemed to happen in the way that you're expecting and hoping, the question may well come, is this the coming one? And add into that that

Jesus has been talking about the great year of Jubilee when there would be liberty for the captives. Where was John's liberty? Where was the vindication of this righteous and loyal prophet and minister of God? Here were two aspects of prophetic expectation that Jesus didn't seem to be fulfilling, certainly not for John.

Where was the vindication of the righteous and with it the just judgment of the wicked? Where was Herod's judgment? Where was liberty from captivity for John? Surely if Jesus could bring life to death, then surely he could release John from prison.

Friends, the Bible doesn't whitewash reality. One of the reasons we can trust it is because it doesn't hide unfortunate things. It doesn't hide weakness and doubting.

[11 : 53] It doesn't preserve great prophets from any semblance of fallenness. It doesn't even hide, verse 28, the imperfections of John the Baptist of whom it was said no one was born greater.

You see, the Bible deals with real life. It isn't ethereal. And isn't that a comfort to us? John's question is one of real doubt. But it's a question asked in faith.

It's a faithful believer wrestling with and reckoning with the shame and cost of faithfulness. He was a believing human being, not a robot.

And who wouldn't at least ask the question in the midst of great trials and pains, have I got this all wrong? Have I missed something? Help me understand. I trust and believe that the Lord God has promised to make all things right, that Jesus came to enact the fulfillment of that.

but I'm suffering greatly under the wiles of a wicked ruler. And a wicked ruler who's propped up by the occupying empire of the day. And then verse 18, John has reported to him all the miraculous things that Jesus has done.

[13 : 06] Where's my salvation? Isn't that the kind of question that we wrestle with in our souls? If Jesus is on the throne, if Jesus is Lord, why do we have to suffer under such wicked and deceitful rulers?

If Jesus is the long promised king, why does he allow his word and ways to be so trampled and mocked by the schemes of men in the West? If Jesus is the great liberator from the terrible curse of death, why did I lose my loved one in such tragedy?

Why so young? Why didn't he hear and heed my anguished longings and prayers? If Jesus is mastery of our sickness, why do I suffer so greatly under the painful afflictions of this fallen body?

Why is my cancer running riot? Why did the baby never arrive? Why does depression hang so heavily that every day is such a battle to get through?

If Jesus' priority is to proclaim the good news of the victory of his kingdom, why does the ministry that I pour myself into feel like such a failure? Why is it that I'm constantly chasing all the students in my growth group who sit loose to church?

[14 : 21] Why is it that I'm constantly picking up the pieces because of sin? Or why, if Jesus is the great liberator, why does my life carry such scars that press upon me?

Have you ever asked the question, why? Why hasn't Jesus fixed everything already? Why hasn't Jesus, if he has all that is claimed, why hasn't he brought deliverance?

I don't think such questions are defiant unbelief. I think they're the agonized cries of faith-seeking reassurance. One thing to notice here, before we see Jesus' patient response, notice what John does with his quandary.

What does he do with his doubts? Verse 19, he takes them to Jesus. I think of two guys who were students at the same time as me, just a couple of years ago now.

Two guys who at around the same time expressed doubts about their faith. And one of them sought to wrestle with those doubts away from the orbit of the church. And sadly, he's nowhere now.

[15 : 44] But the other did the opposite. Bringing his doubts to Jesus right here in this church, and a decade or so on, he's a very fruitful member of the church. He took his doubts to Jesus.

John takes his perplexity and doubt to Jesus. In verse 21 and 22, we see Jesus' response. Jesus continues to do the things that he'd been doing.

He healed people of diseases and plagues. He continued to work out his victory over Satan by casting out evil spirits. And he bestowed sight on many who were blind. And then notice, as he sends back the messengers to report what they've seen and heard, it might seem like Jesus isn't really answering the question here.

Has he just continued to do what he was doing anyway? Healing a number of people here and there. Is that really his response to John? Well, no.

John's question was asking, are you the coming one? Are you the Messiah, the Christ? And look at Jesus' words in verse 22. These are not just descriptive words of what Jesus was doing, causing the blind to receive their sight, the lame to walk, and lepers to be cleansed.

[16:56] The words in verse 22 are lifted straight out of Isaiah 35. And they echo Isaiah's words throughout his prophecy. Prophecies about the coming Messiah.

Jesus is saying, see, all that I am doing is what is spoken of. He's saying to John, yes, I am the coming one. I am the one who will deliver and rescue and liberate and heal.

So even though Herod is king and Rome is in charge, I am working out my salvation. The great restoration has begun. But it is ultimately an eschatological hope.

It's a hope that will only be fully and finally realized at the last day. Jesus has been giving us harbingers and glimpses and pictures of the ultimate salvation he brings.

but that is yet to come. Nonetheless, Jesus' answer points to what he has already done as sufficient evidence for what he will do in his time and in his way.

[18:03] John, all that was promised will happen. Be patient. And so the thing that John and each of us has to reckon with is that it won't always be in the ways that we would decide and choose and it won't be when we would choose it because very often we want it all and we want it now, don't we?

Salvation from all that troubles us now. John is crying out for the great day of judgment to fall on wicked Herod and upon Rome. But that will happen in the Lord's timing and not on ours.

And we don't always like that, do we? But present within these verses is some explanation as to why there is a wait. Notice the last phrase of verse 22.

The preaching of the good news to the poor. We've been seeing the poor in Luke are those who Mary sang of, those of humble estate, those who knew of their unworthiness and need.

And we've seen that Jesus' priority was to preach in other towns also. He wants to spread the message far and wide. And isn't that in keeping with what the Apostle Peter says in his second letter?

[19:22] That's the reason God's judgment is being withheld. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish.

But that all should reach repentance. John, says Jesus, my priorities are far above yours. The time will come, but until then I am about saving individuals.

I want to hold out the offer of life to those who repent. And don't we see that compassion of Jesus all over Luke's gospel as he laid his hands on everyone at Capernaum, as he takes time to go into an individual's home to heal them, as he ministered to the desperate widow in Nain.

Jesus' answer to doubting is, you can trust me. Look at what I've already done and know that greater, fuller is to come.

And so with our doubts, when we long for relief and release from distress, Jesus says to us, I am the one you can trust.

[20:33] Look at what I've done already. Notice Jesus doesn't answer why John is in prison. We won't always get the answers to our doubts and troubles. We won't always know why we face the trials and tribulations that we do.

But Jesus' answer is, you can trust me in spite of it all. I am the one who is to come. Jesus doesn't berate us for genuine doubting.

He is ever tender. He says to us, all these things that you're dealing with are not obstacles to belief. You know that you can trust me. Look at what I've done in history.

Look at what I've done for you. And here's the beauty of belonging to a church. Look at what I've done in the lives of your brothers and sisters. And so verse 23, Jesus says, blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Blessed is the one who doesn't shy away from me, but trusts me and identifies with me. Well, where Jesus tenderly reassures the doubting, the same is not true for the determinedly defiant.

[21:46] Luke goes on to show us, secondly, Jesus' rebuke for the defiantly fickle. Jesus' rebuke for the defiantly fickle in verses 24 to 35. Jesus deals firmly with those who seek reasons to reject his word of salvation.

We move here from John reassuring doubts that are genuine to rebuking and rejecting those who despise the gospel's call upon them. Verse 24, John's messengers depart and Jesus turns to address the crowd.

And Jesus focuses on John the Baptist's ministry. Jesus doesn't cast off or castigate those who have genuine doubts. In fact, here, he certifies and celebrates John's ministry. That ought to hearten those of us who have wrestled with why God does the things he does and the way he does. We've asked those questions. Listen to James Philip on this, talking about John. Doubts do not detract from the divine estimate of our work and witness for God. How encouraging. Notice Jesus' words of affirmation for John, verse 28.

[22 : 59] None born of a woman is greater than John. But, the focus here is on John's ministry. It seems like some who had flocked to John in the wilderness were perhaps now distancing themselves from John's ministry.

And so Jesus says, what were you seeking when you went to the wilderness? A reed shaken by the wind? Were you looking for someone blown about by every wind of doctrine?

A pragmatist? Someone who follows the way the wind is blowing and is without principle? Did you go out to see a man dressed in soft clothing? The word there for soft also has a much seedier meaning.

It means the acquiescing, passive recipient of deviant sexual activity. Someone who bends to the will of someone else. Did you go out to see someone weak, soft, compromised?

One who goes with the flu and concedes of any resistance? No, no. You didn't go to kings' palaces and courts. You weren't going to see a politician. They bend all over the place to public opinion.

[24 : 07] No, you went to see, verse 26, a prophet. But not just any prophet. You went to see the one that Malachi 3 talks about. You went to see the messenger who would prepare the way for the Christ.

Notice how Luke holds these two episodes together around John the Baptist. And it's no coincidence that John asked, are you the one who's to come? A title, a prophetic expectation that is found in this very verse that Jesus quotes.

And here, invalidating John's ministry, Jesus does so by quoting Malachi 3. He said to the crowds, you went out because you recognized that John was the forerunner.

Jesus says, you went out to receive his ministry because it prepared the way. Jesus says, none is greater than John because he is the forerunner who preached a baptism of repentance that cleared the way for me to come and declare salvation to preach the good news of the victory of my kingdom.

And the real crux of these verses is found in verses 29 and 30. Having gone out to hear John's preaching, verse 29, many responded in repentance and faith, even the tax collectors, those most despised in Israel.

[25 : 33] They recognized God for who he is. They declared him just and received John's baptism of repentance. But, verse 30, look at the contrast. The Pharisees, the lawyers, rejected the purpose of God for themselves, rejecting John's baptism.

Again and again, Luke puts before us very pointed warnings. to the professing church. Who was it here that rejected Jesus? Who was it that wrote off God's word through his prophet?

It was the religious establishment. Those who had positions in the visible church. And then Jesus gets very pointed in verse 31. To what then shall I compare this generation?

Now when Jesus speaks about this generation as a means of address, he's pretty much always saying it very negatively. It's usually a statement of condemnation.

Later on in Luke 9, he talks about a faithless and twisted generation. Luke 11, an evil generation. Generation will be condemned and on and on. And you can see it here too.

[26 : 43] What shall I compare this generation to? Bored children in the marketplace. Unhappy because they can't get others to dance to their tune or sing from their hymn sheet.

Do you see verse 32? We played the flute, but you didn't dance. You didn't dance to our tune. We sang a dirge, but you didn't weep.

You wouldn't sing from our hymn sheet. This is a wholly other response to being confronted by Jesus' mission.

This isn't doubt. This is seeing how Jesus does things. And in not liking it, it's refusing to listen. So he threw the toys out of the pram.

Why? Because Jesus won't dance to our tune or sing from our hymn sheet. It's quite a damning indictment, isn't it? Jesus isn't confronting genuine questions here.

[27 : 45] He's dealing with hard-heartedness that reflects that which isn't to their liking. The hard-heartedness that doesn't want to be removed from their own box, that wants Jesus to fit into it.

The hard-heartedness that means I won't give away what I cherish. And so Jesus goes on, verse 33. The professing church of the day rejects John the Baptist.

His call to repentance falls on deaf ears. We don't want that. His message, as one writer put it, was that their sins were intolerably obnoxious to God.

That's what John was saying to them. We can't be having that. Do you see how the foresters respond? Oh no, he's too much. He doesn't eat or drink.

He must have a demon. We're not going to listen to him. We don't like his message. Look at his oddities. He's clearly evil. Well, if the greatest man born of a woman has a demon, what about the Lord Jesus himself?

[28 : 48] Will they listen to him? Will they listen to Jesus' message of restoration and salvation? What's he do with it? Verse 34. The son of man, well he has come eating and drinking.

Oh no, no. Oh dear, oh dear. He's a glutton, a drunkard. We can't be having him. And notice their problem with Jesus. Verse 34.

He's a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Do you see what Jesus is exposing? The human heart will seek for ways to write off those who confront it with God's word.

John's preaching of repentance calls out humanity and confronts each and every one of us with our sins so that we cannot say the problem is evil out there, but we have to accept that the problem is evil in here.

That it's my problem. I'm responsible for it. That I need to turn in repentance and faith. Well, what lengths are gone to reject such a message?

[29 : 51] They don't want that. But also, Jesus' preaching of salvation is the offer of grace. And isn't it so easy to detest grace too?

We don't want other people to be treated the same as us. We're better than them. We put in the hard work of looking spiritual, of quoting great theologians, of fasting twice a week, of working hard at an outward expression of morality that looks better than others.

Yes, God, be gracious to me, but don't lump me in with that lot over there. So they hate the call to repentance and they hate grace.

that Jesus doesn't dance to our tune or sing from our hymn sheet. His grace extends to those of a humble estate. And where fallen humanity rides at and resists his salvation, then out comes statements like, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

He's a friend of tax collectors and sinners, yuck. A glut and a drunkard. Notice that criticism of Jesus, a friend of tax collectors and sinners, a criticism, but aren't they some of the most precious words spoken of the Lord Jesus?

[31 : 15] He's a friend of sinners, even of those viewed as the gravest. Friends, when the true gospel of the true Messiah confronts people, it is very uncomfortable.

It isn't whispering sweet nothings in our ears, celebrating how wonderful we are. And because that's the case, what will we do with it? When we sit and listen to God's word and it makes us cross, when it gets under our skin, when we're exposed and brought under its bright holy gaze, what do we do? will we humble ourselves and receive it? Verse 29, declaring God just? Or will we find some fault and flaw with the messenger?

Oh, that preacher, he's too academic, he preaches far too long, oh, he's too political, he's always touching on controversial issues, issues best left alone, or he doesn't have the requisite unction to teach me, or he isn't academic enough, preaches too short, lightweight, he's too young, too inexperienced, his tune was a little much for me.

He didn't affirm every doctrine that's precious to me in that one sermon, in fact, he even challenged one of them. He isn't really reformed. He's too much fire and brimstone, and on, and on, and on.

[32 : 52] Do you see the irony in all of this? John doesn't eat, so he's evil. Jesus does eat, so he's to be written off. The human heart is so fickle.

When we're trying to wriggle out of God's word, confronting us, when we're trying to escape the implications of the gospel for us, we'll settle for any excuse. But Jesus is having none of it.

We won't fool him. Here's Ralph Davis. John is too weird. Jesus is too wild. No matter how God speaks to his people, unbelief is not satisfied.

Contrary to what we often assume, unbelief is not thoughtful and rational, but twisted, perverse. Or listen to Charles Simeon writing about those who want to find a way to duck God's word.

He says, we cannot altogether profess ourselves infidels and despise the gospel as a fable. We therefore are constrained to blame the mood, the mood in which it's administered and to condemn the preachers of it in order to justify ourselves.

[34 : 02] But the real ground of our conduct is, he says, that we love darkness rather than light. And if Jesus Christ himself were again to preach to us, we'd reject him, finding fault in his conduct.

When Jesus doesn't dance to our tune or sing from our hymn sheet, when he does things in ways that we wouldn't, when his priorities differ from mine, when his word confronts me, what will I do? Because Jesus won't be controlled by our whims and wills. When we collide with the real gospel of Jesus, what will I do? When you hear a sermon preached that gets under your skin, that challenges how you think, that exposes something about you, that makes you uncomfortable, is your first instinct to pick at the preacher.

Now, of course, the Bible has much to say about the task of preaching. It's vital, it needs to be labored at hard and done rightly. But preaching isn't the focus here.

Hearing and heeding is. I remember at our church prayer meeting once, well, it's common at our church prayer meeting that someone prays for our preachers and that's so helpful, but I remember on one occasion a godly lady in our congregation praying for the preachers, but then praying largely in her prayer for how we as a congregation listen to preaching.

[35 : 33] That's a very good thing to pray. That isn't to say that preachers are perfect and get everything right all the time. Not at all.

In fact, Juntie Roods has a very helpful book on corporate worship. It's called Reformed Worship. Recommend it. And in it, he deals with the question about what happens if a service is perhaps not led brilliantly or a sermon isn't great.

He says, our goal should be to look past the rambling pastor to the Lord behind him. If the preacher is being faithful to scripture, Christ is speaking to us.

The more we mature, the easier it becomes for us to be edified. Our ears will be sharper to our need and Christ's riches on offer. And he says we need to take care not to sit in judgment over sermons and worship, spending more energy assessing the ministry and minister than seeking Christ's grace for ourselves.

Wouldn't it be so sad and tragic if our Sundays became a day to critique instead of celebrate? A day we spend in judgment instead of tasting joy.

[36 : 45] A day sitting in judgment over God's messengers instead of sitting under his gracious message. A day to find ways to wriggle out of God's word instead of being restored and remade by it.

But it doesn't have to be like that. Verse 35, wisdom is justified by all her children.

Jesus has spoken already about children in the marketplace and he has already mentioned the idea of being justified in verse 29. But here he talks about children who are the offspring of wisdom.

And I take it that Jesus is saying those who do hear and heed, those who don't harden themselves, well they prove the goodness of all that Jesus proclaims.

They justify God. And they enjoy greater glory than even John the Baptist. Did you notice that in verse 28?

[37 : 52] Jesus says John is the greatest person born of women. except for everyone who is greater than him. Except for those who are born of the Spirit having responded to Jesus in repentance and faith.

John was great because he was there to usher in the great era of God's salvation. He was there to prepare the way, a great and significant ministry that Jesus recognizes. But those who hear and heed the gospel, those like the centurion, those who are gathered into Jesus' kingdom, they are greater, even the least of them, because they enjoy the fruit of all that John was preparing for. Friends, Jesus couldn't be clearer, could he? Throughout this whole passage, he is making clear that he sets the tune, and it's a tune far more glorious than we could concoct.

but it's also a tune that he invites us to sing with him, to dance and rejoice in with him. And so his message is, let those who hear his voice confronting them today reject the tempting choice of doubting or delay.

Friends, we need to listen to Jesus and not resist him. for he says, blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

[39 : 29] Let's pray. Lord God, we are privileged beyond what we could imagine to have the scriptures which proclaim life and salvation to us.

and so Lord, we ask that you would illuminate our hearts to them and humble us before them and spare us from slipping into enmity towards your gospel.

Grant us your grace that we would ever trust in your son. For we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.