2. The Value of True Wisdom

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[0:00] Well friends, it is very good to see all your faces here tonight. Great joy and encouragement. Is it a little bit warmer than usual here tonight? Just, I thought so. I thought it was just a little bit...

You'll forgive me if I roll up my sleeves. I know that our young people have been away for the weekend. Some of them, I think, were so weary after the weekend that they've shot straight home. Including, I think, my own daughters. I can't spot them around here.

But if you do hear a few gentle zeds being put out from amongst the places where there are young folk, you will forgive them. I might just chuck a little pellet of paper at various people if they're fast on asleep.

But we can allow a little bit of that when you've had a very busy weekend. Alright, well let's turn to Proverbs chapter 2 again. Now last week we were in the first chapter, and if you were here you'll remember that.

And we were looking at chapter 1 under the title of the character of true wisdom. And we especially noticed verse 7, which is a kind of motto text or theme of the whole book.

[1:01] Just have a look at that. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. So now tonight we're in chapter 2, page 528.

And this teaches us not so much the character of true wisdom as the value of true wisdom. And you'll know that these chapters, really the whole of the book of Proverbs, are addressed to a young man.

This is a coaching manual for youth, you might almost say. And chapter 2 is designed to stir up in this young man a hunger for the wisdom that comes from God.

And that is still the function of chapter 2, to stir up in all of us, young and old, a hunger to have more of God's wisdom. So I think I'd better ask this question before we go any further.

And the question is, do you and I really want more of God's wisdom? Do we want it? Do we want to grow in wisdom? Nearly a century ago, a cartoon appeared in Punch magazine and it showed a big game hunter in Africa.

[2:09] I guess in Kenya or Uganda. And this man was walking along a hillside track with his rifle on his arm, grimly looking in front of him. But above him on this steep hillside, there was a very large rock.

> And above the rock, looking down and grinning down at him, was the face of the largest and most ferocious lion in the whole of Africa. And the caption below the picture read, If you go out looking for a lion, make sure that you really want to find him.

In the same way, if we go out looking for wisdom, we need to ask if we really want to find it. Because not everybody does. Didn't somebody say, if ignorance is bliss, tis folly to be wise?

A lot of folk might say, I'm very happy as I am, thank you very much. I've found a comfortable niche in life. I just want to drift along. Why should I stir my stumps and go looking for God's wisdom?

So let's ask ourselves that question. Do we want it? Do we want to be trained in righteousness? Training is going to involve effort, isn't it? Chapter 1, verse 7 says that it's a fool who despises wisdom.

[3:19] Might we be a fool? Might wisdom prove to be too life-altering to want to take it on board? Am I too set in my ways for it, like a jellyfish on the beach?

Well, let's look into chapter 2, and I trust we will find it quite bracing this evening. But it will teach us the value of true wisdom. And I want to take the chapter in two sections. First, God's wisdom requires a diligent search.

A diligent search. This is the subject, really, of the first five verses of the chapter. Now let's notice the way that Solomon structures these first five verses. He's talking to his son.

So have a look with me at verse 1. My son, if... Then verse 3. Yes, and if... Further dot, dot, dot.

Verse 4. If... Verse 5. Then you will understand the fear of the Lord. And we know from chapter 1, verse 7, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

[4:25] So do you see how Solomon is writing here? This wise older man is saying to his not-so-wise son, If you will follow a certain course, then various blessings will certainly come to you.

So let's see what this young man has to do if he's to come to understand the fear of the Lord. Verse 1. My son, if you receive my words.

Not just hear them and then let them brush off the side of your head. But if you receive them. If you accept them. Acknowledge the truth of them. And, still in verse 1, If you treasure up my commandments with you.

If you put them into the store cupboard of your heart. And guard them carefully because they will be so useful to you. See, these proverbs, friends, are not just for us to say, Hey ho!

Or even ha ha! Because they're rather funny. And aren't they amusing. And then just forget that we've read them. These are for storage. They're to be treasured up and put away inside our hearts.

[5:29] Into the memory bank of our brains. So that they can be recalled at very short notice. Sometimes we need great wisdom from God at very short notice.

Sometimes we need to respond to situations very rapidly. And we won't respond wisely unless the Lord's teaching has been treasured up in our hearts. To be called upon at any moment.

Now we're still in the ifs. So look with me at verse 2. Making your ear attentive to wisdom. Now just think of those two wonderful appendages that you have.

One on each side of your head. Your ears. They are very remarkable, aren't they? Just glance at somebody else's ear for a moment. They're odd things to look at, aren't they? Think of them. Little soft ones for babies.

Bristly ones for old men. And some people have long fleshy ones, don't they? Some people have little round ones like button mushrooms. What is the purpose of our ears?

[6:30] Well, not primarily to listen to Mozart or the X Factor. The primary purpose of our ears is to listen to the... I mean this seriously. The reason the Lord has given us ears is first and foremost to listen to his teaching.

So in the phrase of verse 2, making your ear attentive to wisdom. That is to God's wisdom. And then still in verse 2, inclining your heart, that is the very centre of your decision-making apparatus, to understanding.

Now we're still amongst the ifs. Verse 3, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding. Two very strong verbs used there.

You don't call out or raise your voice if you're not serious. So this is heartfelt prayer. So verse 3, Lord, I'm desperate. I must have insight and I must have understanding.

What a pair of must-haves. Most people's must-haves are very different. But Solomon is saying, son, your must-haves are insight and understanding.

[7:37] And then he brings in another idea to help his son to see just how serious all this is. Verse 4, And if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, now that's a very serious search in mind.

You don't find silver just by accident, do you? You don't turn up silver when you're digging your garden and planting seed potatoes. You don't come across hidden treasures on the beach at air when you're making sandcastles.

These valuable things have to be searched for. That requires effort and planning and expense and time and concentration and sweat and weariness.

There was a fine Scots preacher who used to say, the scriptures will not yield their treasures to chance inquiry. Now just run your eye back over verses 1 to 4 because we have this powerful series of ifs.

If you receive my words, if you treasure up my commandments, if you bend your ear to wisdom, if you incline your heart, if you call out and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver, search for it as for treasure, if, in short, my son, you are prepared to be serious about this, not an idler, not a trivializer, but a young man who means business, then, verse 5, you will understand the fear of the Lord.

[9:06] In other words, you will discover in your day-to-day experience what it means to walk with God, to love him, yes, but to fear him, to fear his displeasure, to tremble, lest we dishonor him, to live as those who are deeply in awe of him.

The promise of verse 5 is that that phrase, the fear of the Lord, should not be some idle tag. It should be a day-to-day experience that we come to understand.

Then you will understand the fear of the Lord. You'll know it from the inside. Wouldn't it be a good thing if the Tron congregation, that's us lot, were to be known as a congregation who fear the Lord?

It's a good thing, it's excellent to be known as a welcoming congregation, which I think we are, and a friendly congregation, and an evangelizing congregation, all excellent things, but to be known also as a congregation who live life in the fear of the Lord.

That would help other people to see that God is to be taken seriously, that the weight and force of his character is deeply stamped upon our lives. Now that's only the first part of the promise of verse 5.

[10:20] Look on to the second part of that promise. That promise, 5b, to the earnest seeker, is that he will find the knowledge of God.

He will find the knowledge of God. He will come to know God. Now is the knowledge of God the knowledge that we prize? What knowledge is prized in our world today?

Maybe a good way of finding out the sort of knowledge we prize today is to think of how our university courses are structured and what subjects are taken. We highly prize scientific knowledge and technical knowledge.

physics and geology, chemistry, biology, information technology skill, engineering, architecture. We train a lot of people these days in management and business and many more in medicine and law, literature, languages, not to mention drama.

Well, I am mentioning it. It's a strange phrase, isn't it? Not to mention media studies, music, art and design. But the knowledge of God, the knowledge of God, even the theology departments of many universities tend to concentrate on the philosophy and practice of various religions rather than on the knowledge of God, knowing God.

[11:43] But here in this verse 5 and throughout the Bible, the greatest prize, the greatest joy is to know God. Jesus said to his father as he prayed to him in John chapter 17, this is eternal life that men and women should know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Now that is the goal of the Christian life. It's the purpose for which you and I were made. The Lord God made us for himself so that we should know him.

He made our eyes so that in the end we should see him. He made our ears to listen to his words. He made our tongues to praise him. He made our hearts to love him.

And we have this promise here in verse 5 that if we will turn our ear to wisdom and our heart to understanding, if we will search for understanding as for silver and hidden treasure, then we will find the knowledge of God.

And compared with knowing him, all our other knowledge, all the combined efforts and energies of all our universities is not worth tuppence. Now here's a surprising thing.

[12:59] It's man who is commanded here to search diligently in verses 1 to 4 and it's man who finds the knowledge of God in verse 5.

But verse 6 tells us that it's the Lord who gives wisdom. So when our earnest seeker does find the knowledge of God, he's in no position to congratulate himself.

He realizes that what he has found is actually a wonderful gift that's coming to him from the Lord. So man does the searching but the Lord does the giving. And if you're a diligent Bible student, you'll be the first to acknowledge this.

You would be an intolerable creature. If you went around saying to your Christian friends, you know I've been a very hard working Bible student now for many years. I have three degrees in Biblical studies.

I've been to the Cornhill training course. By all my hard work I have discovered so much. I've made huge efforts to put my spade deep into the soil of the Bible and I've turned over a great deal of soil and I have come up with the goods.

[14:05] Please do form an orderly queue and ask me any questions that you'd like to. Now anybody who spoke like that would be intolerable. They would need to be taken outside and have their head put in a bucket of cold water.

That is not what Proverbs chapter 2 is about. The earnest seeker here is a humble seeker. He's crying out for insight because he knows how little he has.

And when he does begin to know the Lord better, he realizes that everything he is learning comes from a very gracious God as a gift. verse 6, it's the Lord who gives wisdom.

And how does the Lord give it? Does he, as it were, zap it into our brains or inject it into our blood streams? No. Verse 6 tells us from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

In other words, he speaks to us and teaches us and he's recorded the words of his mouth here in the 66 books of the Bible. So as we diligently read the Bible and ponder the Bible and listen to the Bible being taught, we will find the knowledge of God.

[15:14] It means, friends, that those who come to know the Lord well are going to have dog-eared Bibles, Bibles that are falling to pieces. If you mean business about knowing the Lord, you will have to buy yourself a new Bible every few years.

So there's our first section. God's wisdom requires a diligent search. It's a lifelong search, of course, and it gets better and better.

Now secondly, God's wisdom gives us extraordinary blessings. The first four verses of this chapter, that's the if verses, they challenge us to embark on a lifelong search.

But from verse 5 onwards, King Solomon is telling his son about all the blessings that will come to us as God's wisdom gets into our systems. You see, knowing God and living in the fear of the Lord is unimaginably good for us.

To know the Lord will bring great blessings which are unknown to people who don't know him and trust him. So let me point out three great blessings which Solomon describes in the rest of chapter 2.

[16:24] The first is protection. Protection. There it is in verses 7 and 8. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. Now here's the protection. He's a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.

Now those two verses are describing believers. The upright and those who walk with integrity in verse 7 and the just and the saints of verse 8.

These are all descriptions of believers. believers. So in these verses God is promising to be a shield and a guardian and a watching protector to his people.

Now that is immensely comforting. But we need to bear in mind that in the Bible the protection that God gives to believers is not always protection from trouble and suffering.

Now just think of the servants of God that we meet in the Bible. From Moses right through to the Apostle Paul many of them suffered a great deal and suffering is still coming to many Christian people today.

[17:34] So the shielding and guarding and watching over of verses 7 and 8 that's a promise of protection not necessarily from suffering but protection in the midst of suffering.

Think for example of the Apostle Paul. Apart from the Lord Jesus nobody suffered in the New Testament as Paul did. In fact on the very day of his conversion the Lord said about Paul I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

And suffer he did. He tells us fully and frankly about his sufferings in his letters about his imprisonments and stonings floggings times of hunger and weariness several shipwrecks hatred murderous opposition from Jews and Gentiles betrayals desertions.

But if you were to ask Paul in the words of Proverbs 2 Paul has the Lord been a shield to you and has the Lord watched over your way he would have said wonderfully wonderfully yes I'm scarred I'm bruised I've been taken to the very end of my tether many times I've even despaired of life itself but the Lord has protected me and rescued me again and again.

And I think that many of the older Christians who are here tonight would say something similar possibly one or two of the younger ones here as well. Now you haven't suffered as the Apostle Paul did but as you look back over your life you know that the Lord has guarded you and kept you through those times when you have been stretched to your very limit and perhaps your faith has sunk low.

[19:15] You've perhaps quite often said how can I go on? How can I go on as a Christian? But the Lord has preserved your life as a Christian and you do go on and your trust and your joy even though it may have fallen down at times has been renewed to you again and again.

Now this is what verses 7 and 8 are promising to the Christian. Sufferings will come to believers because the world we live in in Paul's words in Romans is in bondage to decay.

That's partly why we suffer. The world is in bondage to decay and you and I are caught up in this process of decay. You younger ones who are here might find this rather hard to believe but some of the older people here 50 years or so ago were fine footballers fine athletes beauty queens with thick shiny brown hair and complexions complexions like an English rose.

You'd rather have a complexion like an English rose than a Scottish thistle I'm sure wouldn't you? They were. They were young. I sometimes look in the mirror especially first thing in the morning and the words of the old hymn come to mind.

Change and decay and all around I see. It's a great line that isn't it? But it's okay. It's okay. You can cope with the decay when you know that the Lord is your shield and guardian and protector.

[20:43] It really is alright. I want to assure you younger ones that that is the case. So there's the first blessing that accompanies this gift of wisdom. God's protection throughout life. Now secondly we're promised understanding.

Look at verse 9. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity every good path. Now that's not a promise that we're going to understand everything.

It's not a promise that we shall understand physics and mathematics or how to speak Russian. Verse 9 holds out to us a much more marvellous promise and that is that we will come to understand what is right or righteous and just and fair or equitable.

And the point of verse 9 is that we don't naturally understand these things. By nature we have a very imperfect grasp of what is righteous and just and fair.

In fact it's even worse than that because by nature we think unrighteously and unjustly and unfairly because we naturally tilt every situation to our own advantage towards our own comfort or reputation or self-justification.

[21:57] Martin Luther famously said that mankind is curved in upon himself. Curved in upon himself. In other words our natural way of approaching life is to think how circumstances can enhance us.

We want to be at the centre of our activities. So for example we tend to think of money in terms of how to get it rather than how to give it. Or we think of other people in terms of how they can help us and boost us up rather than in terms of how we can help and love and support them.

We even think of food more in terms of cordon bleu pleasures for our own stomachs than in terms of how we can get more of it onto the plates of those who are hungry.

Our natural position is to be curved in upon ourselves. But as God teaches us his wisdom from the Bible he begins to straighten out what was curved in.

As verse 9 puts it he gives us a clearer view of what is righteous and just and fair of every good path. So we learn to recognize the good path and to distinguish it from the unwise cause.

[23:09] And verse 10 tells us a bit more about this process. It tells us that wisdom will come into our hearts. It will enter the engine room of our thinking and our decision making.

So it won't be something external to us. It won't be like the local council bylaws which are sometimes set out on a big notice board at the entrance to a city park.

You know those sort of notice boards at the park gate with about 195 bylaws? Have you ever stopped to read the bylaws? Have you not? A woman of your integrity, is that right?

Well, of course we don't read them. What sort of things do they possibly say? I suppose they say things like don't light fires, don't carry firearms, don't chase the ducks, don't push unsuspecting poodles into the river.

Now, bylaws of that kind are never going to get into our hearts. They're simply not interesting enough, are they? But verse 10 tells us that God's wisdom will come into our hearts, into the very core of our personality.

[24:16] That's where we need it. And let's notice the second half of verse 10 because it is lovely. this knowledge and wisdom will be pleasant to our souls.

The increase of God's wisdom inside us will be a delight to us. It will be a joy. So as we come to understand righteousness and justice and equity and every good path, there will be a spreading sense of pleasure within our souls.

We will genuinely say how sweet and lovely is the Christian life as I come to understand the scriptures better. So as we come to see God's view of every good path, God's view of how to use our money and our time and how to behave at work, how to behave in marriage and towards the opposite sex, how to develop and sustain friendships, how to behave towards colleagues and neighbours and our own parents and our own children, our souls over time will be reshaped and it will be pleasant to us to see things increasingly as God sees them.

So let's not overlook that second half of verse 10. To grow in God's wisdom is pleasant and satisfying and joyful. To leave behind the difficulties and pains and anxieties and confusions of the earlier part of our life.

I wouldn't want to be 18 again for a moment. Really, I wouldn't. And to grow on into increasing maturity, that says Solomon, will be pleasant to our souls.

[25:49] Again, you younger ones, you've got so many good things waiting for you in the future. Just hang on in there long enough and you'll see what I mean. Let me put this in a slightly different way and I hope this will be especially encouraging to the younger folk here.

To grow in God's wisdom, to get more of his understanding into our hearts, means that we not only grow as Christians, we grow as human beings.

To grow as a Christian is to discover what human life is for. Now, none of us starts life as a Christian, we know that. Even if you've had the huge advantage of being born into a Christian home and being brought up by Christian parents, you're still born as a sinner who's alienated from God and therefore the glory and beauty of your true humanity is badly disfigured and damaged.

Now, we all start like that. When you become a Christian, you are immediately forgiven, immediately born again, justified in God's sight.

You're given a new status immediately. But it's the years and the decades that follow your becoming a Christian that see you being gradually and progressively transformed in such a way that you recover or rediscover your true humanity.

[27:10] To grow as a Christian is not simply to become more Christian. It's to become more human. We discover how to live life more wisely, more satisfyingly, more joyfully, how to cope with suffering in a much better way.

And the coming of God's wisdom and knowledge into our hearts, says Solomon, will be pleasant to our souls. So, protection, understanding, and now thirdly, with the increase of God's wisdom, we're promised deliverance from evil.

And that's what verses 11 to 22 are all about. When we pray, deliver us from evil, one of God's ways of answering that prayer is by giving us his wisdom.

Do you see it there in verses 11 and 12? Discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech.

And you'll see Solomon then goes on to describe the kind of people from whose clutches wisdom will deliver us. So, at the end of verse 12, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness.

[28:25] Have you met such folk recently? Who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways. So, the promise here is that wisdom will deliver us from such people, from their influence and power over us.

We shan't join them. We shan't imitate them. We'll be able to shun them. I want to give an example of this where a young man was faced with a strong temptation to follow a corrupt and evil course.

Some of you will know that I was in Nigeria for a short time in July. I was one of a team of Bible teachers who had the privilege of teaching at a week-long training course for students, university students, just outside Abuja, which is the capital of Nigeria.

We had about 200 university students there with us and they were mostly leaders of their college Christian unions. We started teaching at eight o'clock in the morning and we finished about nine in the evening.

I've never worked so hard in all my life. A day at Cornhill seemed a doddle compared with that, I can tell you. Well, now, one afternoon, one of these students, lovely young man, about 22, he came to me and asked me for help.

[29:37] Uncle, he said to me, I'm facing a big difficulty. I'm just about to graduate from my university, but I haven't done at all well academically. In fact, as my marks stand, I'm going to be given a third class degree.

Now, the difference between getting a third class and a second class can be the difference, especially in Nigeria, between getting a job or not getting a job at all. So he went on. One of my tutors, my university teachers, I said, how old is this man?

He said, about 28, young man. One of my tutors has told me that he can manipulate the record of my marks so that I'll be pushed up into the second class.

There's no money involved. He's not asking me for money, but this tutor feels that he's being kind to me. He just wants to give me a leg up and a better start for my working career. What do you think I should do? Now, that tutor was behaving in a very corrupt and harmful way.

He was offering also to corrupt this student's conscience by dangling before him this possibility of getting a better job and a better career. So the student was having to choose between honesty and a wise course and a perverted and evil course.

[30:53] Well, I gave him the only advice that I could, and that was to refuse this offer, even if it meant staying in the third class. I encouraged him to trust that God honours those who honour him.

And then I said to him, my friend, will you do the right thing? And he said to me, yes, I will. And there were tears in his eyes, because he knew that honesty would be costly.

But wouldn't it have been much more costly for him to go the other way? Wouldn't it in the end have corrupted him and rotted his moral integrity to go along with that tutor's wicked offer?

If he was prepared to choose the wise course, it would stiffen his spine, and in the words of verse 15, it would deliver him from men whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways.

But that's not all. Look on to verse 16 as well. God's wisdom will also deliver us from the forbidden woman, the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.

[32:06] Now, remember, this is wisdom to a young man. And here Solomon has in mind the young man being tempted by a slightly older married woman. It's rather like the situation that Joseph found himself in in Genesis when Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce him.

Now, the reality of temptation to sexual intimacy outside marriage is all around us today, and it comes equally, of course, to men and women. I guess that few people get right through life without moments or even prolonged periods of temptation to engage in sex outside marriage, before it or outside it.

Now, we know how lovely it is to see shining examples of lifelong marital fidelity. It's a great joy. We know that fidelity is what God desires for us.

So how on earth can frail people like us be delivered from this kind of behaviour, especially when it's excused and often applauded by the society that we live in?

Well, the answer is here in verse 16. God's wisdom will deliver us from this kind of disastrous behaviour. How? Well, we only have to read verses 18 and 19 to see how this works.

[33:24] Her house, says Solomon, the adulteress, sinks down to death and her paths to the departed. None who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.

In other words, God's wisdom teaches us, shows us, the consequences of adultery and sexual immorality, inasmuch as it leads us to a kind of death and ruin.

Now, friends, statements such as we have here in verses 18 and 19 are not inflexible laws. They're generalisations. We know, thank God, that not every person who has committed adultery ends up in spiritual ruin.

God is gracious and we all know folk who have been given grace to repent and, as it were, begin the Christian life all over again. But verses 18 and 19 tell us what will often happen.

And those verses stand there like a lighthouse on the rocks. Don't touch adultery or sexual immorality. That's the message of them. If you go that way, you're in danger of death.

[34:30] So the way God's wisdom delivers us from the temptation to sexual immorality is by getting verses 18 and 19 into our hearts. Once the young man really learns that to go to that woman's house is to set his feet knowingly on the road to death, he will turn on his heel and flee in the opposite direction.

Well, I trust that this second chapter of Proverbs will stimulate our appetites to know God and to get his wisdom into our hearts more deeply. And thus to enjoy his protection, to grow in understanding and to know what it is to be delivered from evil.

And the final three verses of the chapter describe the way of life of those who seek God and his wisdom. But also by contrast they show us the way of life or the way of death really of those who turn away from him.

So let me read those three verses so we can see the contrast. So, Solomon is saying, if my son you walk in the way of the good as I've been teaching you here and keep to the paths of the righteous for the upright will inhabit the land and those with integrity will remain in it.

But the wicked will be cut off from the land and the treacherous will be rooted out of it. In the end there are only two ways to live and every last one of us will follow one way or the other.

[36:03] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Pray for grace and mercy. Our wonderful God, it is a wonder to us that any of us should be saved, that any of us should be on the receiving end of the mercy that we don't deserve at all.

And we want to thank you again that you did not leave us bereft and without comfort or hope in this decaying world, but rather you sent your Saviour at such unimaginable cost to him and to yourself.

And you've given us grace, so many of us, to open our hearts, to receive the good news, to be born again, to be transformed in our status before you.

And we pray that that transformation of actual life and experience will be deepened in all of us. That you'll help each of us, whatever stage we're at, to grow in maturity, to learn more and more, to love you and to seek and search out your wisdom, because we know that it is the most important thing for Christians.

So please be kind to us, our dear Father. Be gracious. Help us to grow. Help us not to be stuck, but to make progress and to know what it is to have the knowledge in us, in our hearts, that is pleasant to our souls.

[37:32] And we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.