

Conspiracy Against Nehemiah: Tactics to Bring Down a Church Leader

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[0 : 01] Well, now we're going to turn to our Bible reading for this evening. One of our ministers, Paul Brennan, is again going to be preaching to us from the book of Nehemiah. We've been spending time in Ezra and Nehemiah, one book, remember, since all the way back in October. A book that we've been seeing is so totally contemporary for us.

It's a book all about building God's kingdom and also the various attempts of the enemy to curtail such work. And we're going to read this evening Nehemiah chapter 6. So do grab a Bible and turn to that.

If you don't have one with you, if you're visiting with us, we do have some spread around at the front, at the sides, at the back. If you're not sure where, I'm sure one of the welcome team would love to grab one for you.

But do turn up to Nehemiah chapter 6, and we're going to read that together. Beginning then at verse 1.

Now, when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it, although up to that time I had not set up the doors and the gates, Sanballat and Geshem sent to me saying, Come and let us meet together at Hakafirim in the plain of Onu.

[1 : 27] But they intended to do me harm. And I sent messengers to them saying, I am doing a great work. I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?

And they sent to me four times in this way. And I answered them in the same manner. In the same way, Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand.

And it was written, it is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel. That's why you're building the wall.

And according to these reports, you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, there is a king in Judah. And now the king will hear of these reports.

Soon I come and let us take counsel together. Then I sent to him saying, No such things as you say have been done, for you're inventing them out of your own mind.

[2 : 43] For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking their hands will drop from the work and it will not be done. But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Now, when I went into the house of Shemiah, the son of Deliah, son of Mehethabel, who was confined to his home, he said, Let us meet together in the house of God within the temple.

Let us close the doors of the temple, for they're coming to kill you. They're coming to kill you by night. But I said, Should such a man as I run away?

And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in. And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess, Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

[4 : 06] So the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month of Elul, in 52 days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shekariah, the son of Ara.

And his son Jehonanan had taken the daughter of Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, as his wife. Also, they spoke of his good deeds in my presence, and reported my words to him.

And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. Well, amen. This is God's word. And we'll return to it shortly.

Well, good evening, and please have Nehemiah chapter 6 open. It'll be helpful to you as we spend a bit of time considering this chapter.

[5 : 26] So, Nehemiah 6. The enemy is determined to stop the building of God's kingdom.

Be in no doubt, Satan is real, and he is determined to stop faithful Bible-preaching churches in their tracks.

And that has become abundantly clear in these chapters of Nehemiah over the past few weeks.

First, there was the external threat, back in chapter 4, from Sambalat and others, as they worked against the whole people of God, trying to stop them doing the building work.

Then, as we saw last week, there was a threat from within. The enemy sowed internal discord. We saw that last time, the threat from within.

And this week, in chapter 6, the enemy launches yet another attack. And this one is a precision strike.

[6 : 32] There is one man, and one man only, in the enemy's sights this time, and it's the leader. It's Nehemiah. Nehemiah is the man under attack in this chapter.

The enemy's no fool. And he knows that if he can get at the leader of God's people, then he'll likely bring down the whole enterprise. The Art of War is an ancient Chinese manuscript on the nature of military warfare written in the 5th century BC.

And the writer, Sun Tzu, I probably pronounced that wrong, but anyway. And in it, he outlines this timeless principle. If you want to beat an army, you go for the general.

By eliminating the leader, you disrupt the army's coordination, decision-making, morale, and crucially, you destroy their effectiveness. You go for the general.

Now, that concept didn't originate with Sun Chi. The great enemy has deployed this tactic from the very beginning. Get at the leaders of God's people.

[7 : 46] Get at the pastor. And the enemy can hamper the effectiveness of a church very well. You see it with Moses frequently. You see it here in Nehemiah.

You see it with the Apostle Paul. All the way through the Bible. The leader of God's people is targeted. Now, we know, don't we, that the church does not depend on human leaders.

It is Christ who is building his church. He is the great shepherd. He's the one we look to. We have great confidence in him. But Jesus does use human under-shepherds.

That is his method for growing his church. He raises up men to lead his precious people. And the thing is, as those men step into those roles, they have a massive target on their back.

The enemy will seek to bring them down, especially if they are effective leaders. Leaders like Nehemiah. He was one such effective leader.

[8 : 52] And as the wall reaches its conclusion, as the building work comes to an end, there is one last onslaught from the enemy. And we would do well to note the tactics deployed here by the enemy.

They are very familiar tactics. And having seen them set out for us here in the Scriptures, we will be better placed to identify those same tactics now, in this present gospel age.

Be in no doubt, friends, Nehemiah is as relevant today as ever. Don't imagine for a minute, this is just an interesting piece of biblical history.

The tactics deployed here by the enemy, he still deploys today in actual churches. He will seek to take down actual church leaders today.

The enemy's got no original ideas. He's just hitting repeat. He does the same thing over and over again. We spent some time just before Easter with my family, with another pastor in another country.

[9 : 59] And he was facing exactly some of these things in his own congregation as we were there with him. His own brother, a minister down in England, had faced some of the same things exactly.

Letters being written about him, scattered around. Really, really difficult. He almost left the ministry. Deeply painful. Do not be naive, friends. This thing happens. It can happen here.

Any church. This sort of thing can happen. And so this chapter is here to equip us as a church to be prepared for attacks on our church leaders.

Remember what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 15 about the Scriptures, about the purposes of books like Nehemiah. He says here, whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

What's this here for? Why is Nehemiah here, according to Paul? To give us endurance.

Encouragement. To put steel in our spines.

[11:10] And steel is what we need in the face of enemy attacks of the nature that we see here in Nehemiah. So what do we learn here about the enemy and the tactics he seeks to deploy to bring down leaders?

Three ones we see. The first is in verses 1 to 9. Tactic number one. The enemy will seek to alarm God's servants through deceitful charm and defamation of character.

That's the first tactic. Seek to make him afraid. And in light of such attacks, God's leaders, what do they need to do? They need to rely on God. They need to lean on God's strength to keep going.

Now the goal of this first wave of attack is to alarm Nehemiah, to frighten him. That's Nehemiah's assessment.

Look at verse 9. He says, For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking we would stop the work.

[12:20] Our hands would drop. And there were two stages in this campaign to frighten Nehemiah from Sambalat and his friends. Stage 1 is verses 1 to 4. And that was a ploy to charm Nehemiah, to seduce him into a meeting.

We see the approach comes in verse 2 from Sambalat. Sambalat and Geshem sent to me saying, Come, let us meet together at Hakathirim. You pronounced it better, Josh.

I can't pronounce that. In the plain of Ono. There's a clue in the name. Ono. But as Nehemiah correctly discerns, end of verse 2, they intended to do me harm.

How did he know that? How did Nehemiah know that this meeting was a trap? Well, for a start, Nehemiah was not born yesterday. He is no fool.

He's been around the block. He was, as we've already seen in Nehemiah, he was a realist in terms of human nature and the capacity for sin.

[13:28] He knew the track record of Sambalat too. He'd had encounters with him before. He's being invited to a secret meeting in a location at the very edge of his territory about a day's journey for Nehemiah.

and it's right on the border of Samaria and Ashdod, two big enemies of the Jewish people. And Nehemiah rightly smells danger.

This wasn't just an innocent meeting. This was a takedown. They wanted Nehemiah gone. They wanted to take him out. That's the worst case scenario.

Nehemiah had an accident on the way somehow. A more generous reading would conclude that they just wanted to do whatever they could to distract Nehemiah from his work.

Come to a meeting, they say. Perhaps they could push back the wall building by a few days, maybe a week, by some time. I'm fairly sure that the making of many meetings is a key tactic in the enemy's strategy to distract leaders from the core work.

[14:39] One writer put it this way, there are times when conferring between interested parties is a very necessary and often urgent task.

But, it is just as certain that such conferences can constitute a complete distraction from the necessary work that is crying out to be done, a hindrance for it, even a substitute for it.

There is something in human nature that loves conferences and committees. The more interminable, the better. And how truly they prevent real work being done. That's a very naive reading of the situation, a bit of time wasting.

But time wasting is an effective tactic in the enemy's arsenal. And wisely, Nehemiah, in his public response, diplomatically replies, says, I've got a lot of work to do.

I can't afford to take what would in reality be about two or three days traveling there, having the meeting, coming back. I can't afford the time. He had the discernment to know that this meeting was one to miss.

[15 : 49] And there are so many things that can draw a minister away, that can draw a church leader away from what is truly essential gospel work.

There are so many meetings to be attended. All the emails I get in my inbox, come to this meeting, come to that meeting. No. So many seemingly worthy projects.

But the reality is that many of them have a very poor use of time. Everything, everything a leader says yes to means saying no to something else.

A church leader needs discernment, conviction. He also needs determination because they kept coming at him. Four times, notice, Sambalat invites Nehemiah, verse four.

Every time, Nehemiah knocks them back. And so, Sambalat changes tack. He's seeking to frighten Nehemiah, and so he ups the ante. Here's stage two under our first point.

[16 : 49] Stage one hasn't worked. Stage two in the campaign to frighten Nehemiah, verses five to nine, is nothing other than a campaign of defamation of Nehemiah's character.

It's slander designed to alarm Nehemiah, to scare him into stopping the work. Look at verse five. In the same way, Sambalat, for the fifth time, sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand.

In it was written, it is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel. That is why you're building the wall. And according to these reports, you wish to become their king.

You've also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem. There is a king in Judah. And now the king will hear of these reports. So now, come, let us take counsel together.

Sambalat sends an open letter. He could have sent private correspondence to Nehemiah with his concerns. But he doesn't do that, because the target audience is not Nehemiah, is it?

[18 : 03] It was everybody else. This was a letter to be read by everybody else. An open letter. Anyone could read it. And that was the whole aim.

The malicious rumors contained within it would soon become public knowledge. And that was surely Sambalat's aim, wasn't it? He sought to bring down Nehemiah's character, his reputation, bring it into question.

he throws out these allegations, which, as it turns out, are totally devoid of any real content, no foundation. Allegations, they write, verse 6, are reported among the nations.

And Geshem also says it. Well, if Geshem says it, it must be true. But the mere act of the allegations, the accusations, that's the damage, isn't it?

invoking Geshem's name seems to give extra credibility. And they're clever about it, aren't they? It is reported that.

[19 : 06] I'm not saying it, but it's reported. Some people are saying this. We're only reporting. Here's an attack on Nehemiah at the very point where he just proved himself faithful to God.

And he's accused of doing all of it, not for God, but actually for himself, for his own self-promotion. You're just doing it for yourself. You want to be king. And the same tactic plays out today in the church.

The enemy knows how effective slander is, how quickly people are, even seasoned Christians, how quick they are to believe slander, to believe allegations about a leader's integrity or motivations.

He's just empire building. He's in it for himself. Well, Nehemiah stood firm, didn't he? He knew that he would, in the end, be vindicated.

He knew there was nothing whatsoever in the letter that had any truth in it, not even remotely close. And that must have taken great resolve, courage, from Nehemiah, don't you think?

[20 : 18] when his reputation is being dragged through the mud like that, when an open letter is doing the rounds, calling to question his integrity, his conduct, his motivations.

Hugely tempting to sack it all in, don't you think? It's just not worth the hassle. Nehemiah had a job back in Susa, remember? He was cut bearer to the king, pretty Christian number.

All the comforts of the palace, trusted by the most powerful man in the kingdom, he was a wine taster. He could go back and tour around the vineyards, enjoying all the best wine in the whole empire.

Pretty tempting, in the face of Sambal at Slander. I'll just go back to Susa. That was the easier option. But Nehemiah won't be deterred.

His wise response plays a very straight bat. He's nothing to hide. Look at verse 8. No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.

[21 : 25] And then he flings himself from the Lord, but now, O God, strengthen my hands. The wall building remains his priority, despite all this going on.

He knows in the end he will be vindicated, as one writer put it, God always vindicates his real work and his true servants. So don't be frightened by Slander.

Don't be demoralized when you're defamed for Jesus' sake, for it is the sign of real, genuine Christian service. It is a sign that real and lasting work is being done and the devil is raging. The devil wouldn't bother with Nehemiah if it was ineffective. And so it is for Nehemiah and every leader in God's church since.

But Nehemiah, even though he's a good leader, he's still a man. He felt keenly the biting allegations, the possibility that once those allegations are made, they're out there, people will be willing to believe it.

[22 : 34] You know, the old line, there's no smoke without fire. People believe that. No matter what Nehemiah said from this time on, there would always be the possibility that the king and others would harbor doubts about him because of what's been going on here, because of Sambalot's open letter.

But not just the king, his own friends, Nehemiah's friends might fall into believing it. Would they too have doubts concerning what this project's been ultimately about? Thinking Nehemiah's in it for himself?

Well, Nehemiah could not be certain, could he, of what others thought, what his friends or even the king would think, concerning his true motives now? But he could always be certain that God knew the reality.

God knew his heart. His cries would ascend to him and be heard in heaven. God knows Nehemiah's true heart. That's his comforts, isn't it?

In the end, that's the only opinion that ultimately matters. But that's not the end of the onslaught. They've tried to frighten him, but Nehemiah cracks on.

[23 : 47] Here's the second tactic from verses 10 to 14. The enemy will seek to deceive God's servants and therefore to discredit them.

And when such attacks come, what do church leaders need? They need clarity to see the reality of the situation. Now, the situation seems, at first glance, legitimate enough.

Verse 10, Nehemiah pops around to see Shemaiah. He's requested a meeting with Nehemiah in his own house. Now, we don't know a lot about Shemaiah apart from the fact that he's probably linked to one of the families mentioned in Ezra chapter 2.

So, some of those returners from Babylon back to Jerusalem. And the other thing we know is that he's a prophet. In other words, he's one of Nehemiah's own.

He's a Jewish man, he's a prophet. And he has some concerning news for Nehemiah. Look at the middle of verse 10. Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple.

[24 : 54] Let us close the doors of the temple, for they're coming to kill you. They're coming to kill you by night. You can imagine the shock Nehemiah feels with this news from Shemaiah. News of a planned assassination.

But again, something doesn't sit right for Nehemiah. He discerns something's amiss. Shemaiah is seemingly confined to his home, middle of verse 10, perhaps he's got some illness.

But a suggestion that they flee to the temple suddenly, it seems his confinement suddenly ended. He's miraculously healed. Now, Nehemiah's been around the block a few times.

You can read between the lines. He's no fool. And he sees through the plot and declines the invitation to go to the temple on two grounds. Number one, start of verse 11, essentially Nehemiah's saying, bring it on.

Look at what he says, men want to kill me? Should a man such as I run away? I'm not going to run away. He's not going to run off on the basis of some scaremongering. Reason two, second half verse 11, Nehemiah knows that Shammai's proposed solution, escape to the temple, that's actually a trap.

[26 : 13] Nehemiah knows that's a trap. Nehemiah knows that he couldn't go into the temple, it wasn't permitted for Nehemiah, he was a layman, he wasn't allowed to go in the temple and live, he couldn't do it.

Nehemiah to do so would give his enemies grounds to condemn him. Look at what Nehemiah's done, he's gone to the temple, who does he think he is? A huge temptation I'm sure for Nehemiah

to think he was perhaps above the rules.

I can go to the temple, I'm Nehemiah, I can go, I'm a special case. This is a very tempting tactic isn't it, it's playing into Nehemiah's pride perhaps, oh you're more important than you realise, you can go to the temple, it's no problem.

Very tempting for church leaders today, for their pride to kick in, to think they're above the rules that apply to everybody else. the truth is, Nehemiah had the clarity of thought to see through the whole charade.

Look at verse 12, and I understood, and I saw that God had not sent him, but he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sambalat had hired him.

[27 : 27] For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way in sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. Shammai's been paid off. Surely that's pretty painful for Nehemiah.

Here was one of his own prophets. Who would have thought that the enemies of Nehemiah had friends among the very people he'd come to help and serve?

James Philip in his notes writing decades ago put it this way, Shammai had put on an act, and he was a traitor in the pay of the enemy, a friend and counselor of Nehemiah, and yet a member of the fifth column.

What must this have cost Nehemiah in hurt and distress to realize that a man on whose counsel and friendship he had counted had proved false to him and betrayed his trust?

This is one of the most painful of all experiences in Christian work. It's enough to discourage the stoutest hearts. I wonder if the words from Psalm 55 were going through his mind at this moment.

[28 : 47] For it is not an enemy who taunts me, then I could bear it. It is not an adversary who deals insolently with me, then I could hide from him, but it's you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.

We used to take sweet counsel together within God's house. We walked in the throng. My companion stretched out his hand against his friends.

He violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart. His words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you. He will never permit the righteous to be moved. I wonder if Nehemiah prayed that in his heart.

But the great personal pain, the sense of betrayal Nehemiah felt didn't deflect him from God appointed task. His response to the two overtures from the enemy sum up the depth of his dedication to the work.

[29 : 51] Verse 3, I cannot come down, and verse 11, I will not go in. I'm sticking to what I'm doing. In the face of these tactics, what God's leaders need here is discernment.

Shammai didn't advertise, did he, his deception? He was claiming to be a prophet from the Lord. Here's a prophecy. It came cloaked in religious-sounding language. He spoke of the temple.

He pretended that God had sent him to warn Nehemiah. But Nehemiah discerned that God had not sent him. Nehemiah knew he had to look past the presenting issue, to discern the real heart of the matter.

Leaders need to be able to do that, to be alert to deception, to be able to see through it, so as not to be tempted into acting sinfully. That was Nehemiah's concern, wasn't it?

Look at verse 13. So Nehemiah discerns it and he avoids the trap, but he also avoids taking revenge.

[31 : 06] He leaves it to the Lord. Look at verse 14. Remember Tobiah and some ballots, my God, according to these things they did. He wanted to make me afraid.

He leaves it to the Lord. But this isn't the end of it. The enemy will not give up. There's more to come. The final strand of the enemy's tactics comes in verses 15 to 19.

The enemy will seek to exhaust God's servants through the constant pressure to compromise. And in light of that sort of attack, God's leader needs tenacity to keep going, to keep on, despite the constant disappointments.

Verse 15, amazingly, the walls built in only 52 days. Remarkable. Considering all the challenges we've observed, both external and internal, Nehemiah has managed to repair the walls of Jerusalem.

He's not only a faithful leader, but a fruitful one. Look what he's done. He's rallied the people, built the wall. And the enemy despises fruitful leaders. A leader like that strikes fear into the enemy's hearts.

[32 : 23] Note verse 16, when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of God.

God was evidently at work through Nehemiah's fruitfulness. God uses fruitful, faithful leaders. When the enemy sees the leader like that, he will act.

You can be sure of that. Now let me ask you, do you think we have a fruitful leader? I can ask that because he's on sabbatical, he's not here.

I think we do. What we observe is a fruitful church. There is a connection to the fruit you see and the leadership we have.

What do you think the enemy thinks when he sees that? Well, he's not going to down tools, is he? The enemy's not going to stand back and just leave it alone. No, he'll keep on.

[33 : 36] He will seek to exhaust God's leaders, fruitful leaders. He'll seek to grind them down. How? Look at verse 17. Here's how it goes about here.

Moreover, in those days, the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shekariah, the son of Arrah, and his son, Jehonan, had taken the daughter of Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, as his wife.

Also, they spoke of his good deeds in my presence, and reported my words to him, and Tobiah sent letters to him. So what's going on here?

Well, Tobiah, we've encountered him plenty, haven't we? He's one of the chief opponents of Nehemiah. He has quite a number of the Jews wrapped around his finger, it seems. He was in constant contact with some of the more powerful folk amongst the Jews.

There were all sorts of financial arrangements going on. Commercial contracts seem to be signed. He's also got marriage ties into the community. He's very much involved, embedded. And what this meant was that there was a constant stream of letters from Tobiah to Nehemiah, no doubt fueled by gossip from pro-Tobiah faction within the Jewish community.

[34 : 57] You read there of Meshulam, end of verse 18. He's in the list of wall builders back in chapter 3, and yet he seems that he was something of a traitor, conniving with Tobiah.

Nehemiah, deeply involved with the building of the wall, but in secret, in contact with Tobiah, one of the key enemies of Nehemiah, feeding him information.

But that is sometimes the reality. Don't be surprised by how deeply embedded in the people of God, agents of the enemy can be. The outcome of all this was a constant pressure applied to Nehemiah to adopt a gentler, more inclusive, softer policy to the surrounding nations, particularly towards Tobiah and Sambalat.

Go easy, Nehemiah. Don't worry about the wall. We're all friends here. Don't be so hardline, Nehemiah. We need to be winsome, build some bridges. Now, these Jews who are perhaps putting pressure on Nehemiah, they were perhaps well-meaning, perhaps a bit naive, but they didn't know what Nehemiah knew about Tobiah and Sambalat, perhaps.

At worst, they were deliberately destructive, deliberately urging a policy of syncretism and interfaith dialogue, trying to undermine Nehemiah from within.

[36 : 36] And for Nehemiah, this disloyalty within the people must have been deeply exhausting for him. The constant stream of letters from Tobiah, trying to make him afraid.

Leaders need, therefore, tenacity to keep on going. Well, how do we do that? How do leaders keep on going? Well, we look, don't we, to our great shepherd, to the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who endured attacks, the one who faced betrayal for us, the one who's promised never to leave or forsake us.

That's the one we look to. He's the one we look to. There's nothing that Nehemiah faced that Jesus hasn't. And the enemy can unload his full arsenal.

But in the end, God's church, God's leaders, they are kept safe for all eternity in the end. Our Lord will never leave or forsake us.

The second verse in our closing hymn says this, My foes are ever near me, around me and within. But Jesus, draw still nearer and shield my soul from sin.

[38 : 01] The enemy will fall in the end. His schemes will come to naught. And so we keep on going. Pray your leader would keep on going.

No matter deceit and defamation, no matter deception designed to discredit, no matter the discouragement of compromise, no matter what attack the enemy launches on a leader, we pray that God would strengthen their hands for gospel building.

Friends, be in no doubt. The enemy's real. He deploys these tactics. Pray for your leaders. They'd have the strength to keep going. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, how we thank you that your word equips us. It gives us light to bring us clarity and courage and conviction so that we would stand in the face of every onslaught because of our fear and love for you, our Father in heaven, and because of our love and compassion for your people, your sheep, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So help us, Lord, to see and so to resist all attacks of the evil one. Help us to help one another so that together we might stand, and having done all things, to stand firm in the faith, once for all delivered to the saints, and to stand at the last day having been found faithful and not wanting.

[39 : 51] So keep us all the days of our lives as your servants, building for the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.