

God's Word: Off the Page and into the Heart

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Date: 30 June 2019

Preacher: Edward Lobb

- [0 : 00] Come now to our Bible reading and please grab a Bible and turn to Psalm 119. You'll find that on page 512 of our church Bibles.
- Edward Lobb will be continuing his current series in this great Psalm. And this morning we will begin looking at the second section, which begins at verse 9.
- So Psalm 119 and we begin reading at verse 9. Hear the word of the Lord. How can a young man keep his way pure by guarding it according to your word?
- With my whole heart I seek you. Let me not wander from your commandments. I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
- Blessed are you, O Lord. Teach me your statutes. With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight.
- [1 : 14] As much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts. And fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes.
- I will not forget your word. Well, amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Well, good morning, friends.
- Good to see you all. Let's turn to Psalm 119. You'll find this on page 512 in the hardback Bibles. And we're looking at this second stanza, which is entitled Beth.
- Not Bethany. Not Bethan. But Beth being the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. I'm sure you're aware of that. But this psalm falls into 22 stanzas. And each stanza is headed by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
- In a sense, it sums up everything. A kind of alpha and omega. Well, let's start today with a classic question. The question is, how do we get God's words, the words of the Bible, to leave the written page and to lodge in our hearts so that our lives and our thinking are transformed?
- [2 : 34] Now, think of it. The world contains many Bibles, billions of Bibles. But are they being allowed to do their work? Are they bringing to their owners truth and joy and liberation?
- Or are they just gathering dust in people's back bedrooms? This second section of Psalm 119 is a very practical section.
- It's about our daily relationship with the words of the Bible. And my title is God's Word, Off the Page and Into the Heart. But the practical question is, how do we get God's words, the words of the Bible, to take up real residence in our hearts?
- Well, let me quickly recap the main points I tried to make last week in introducing this psalm. The whole psalm is about God's verbal instruction to the believer.
- And it's about the believer's response to what God says to us. Christianity is not a religion. It's a relationship. The Lord God speaks to us, addresses his words to us, and we learn to respond to his words.
- [3 : 40] And over time, his words transform us, our conduct, and our thinking. This psalm 119 is about the individual personal life of the believer.

It's about the nitty-gritty of what goes on inside our minds. It is very practical. It's about actually living a fruitful, happy Christian life. It shows us the way how to live under God's blessing.

And that's why the very first verse says, Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in or within the law of the Lord. But you'll see just how practical it is as soon as you notice the searching question, which begins verse 9.

How can a young man keep his way pure? And verses 9, 10, and 11 show us three pitfalls which lie in wait for a young man, or indeed for any human being.

The first pitfall, verse 9, is a way of life or conduct which is not pure. We'll think about that word pure in a moment. Secondly, from verse 10, there's the pitfall of wandering away from the Lord's commandments, a bit like a sheep that spies a hole in the fence and escapes from the shepherd.

[4 : 54] And then thirdly, from verse 11, there's the more general pitfall of sinning against the Lord. So how is it possible for a young man not to fall into these traps or pits?

Well, I've got three main points I'd like to get across from this section this morning. And here's the first. These verses teach the believer to store up God's words in our hearts.

There it is in verse 11. I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. As the words of God get off the page and take root in our hearts, we're protected against the pitfalls of verses 9, 10, and 11.

Now, there's the strongest possible connection between verse 9 and verse 11. If the young man is to keep his way pure, he guards his way, his conduct, his behavior, by bringing it into line with God's word.

But he's only able to do this guarding if the word of God is stored up in his heart. If the word of God is on the page but not in the heart, it can't perform its proper function.

[6 : 05] But as the word of God fills the human heart, it will inevitably set a guard around that person's conduct. Look again at that question that begins verse 9.

Surely it's one of the most striking, memorable questions in the Bible. The Bible contains a lot of great questions. But here is one of them. How can a young man keep his way pure? Think of a young man on the threshold of maturity, his whole life before him.

How can he plow a straight furrow? How can he live rightly? He's faced with a thousand different choices. How can he choose well? How can he live in such a way as to avoid ending up in the slurry?

But this great question itself raises further questions. Why a young man? What about the older man? What about the women?

Well, perhaps the best way to understand the young man element is to think of the psalmist as a teacher, which he undoubtedly is. And just as the book of Proverbs addresses the young man, speaking to him as my son, it may be that our psalmist here is consciously instructing the young men of his own day in how to live a godly life.

[7 : 21] He's falling in with that tradition of instruction. Think of youth and young adulthood. Those years, say, between 18 and 25. That's the time when most people are setting the direction of their lives.

Their little ship, so to speak, is leaving the safety of the harbor and is setting out into the potentially choppy waters of adult life. So we ask the question, how can I launch out in the right direction?

Is it possible in this grubby world of a thousand temptations to keep one's way pure? Now, if you're a young man, you are by definition full of hormones.

And you're bound to think that verse 9 is all about sex. No doubt it includes sex, but it's much more than that. Pure means without alloy, without a mixture of other elements.

So pure water means water without anything else added to it. Pure joy is joy without a trace of sadness. So to keep one's way pure is to live a godly life, a God-pleasing life, without the impurities of moral compromise getting mixed up in it.

[8 : 31] Is that really possible, we ask? Yes, says our psalmist. How, we ask? By guarding your life according to God's word, says our teacher in verse 9.

And how am I going to guard my life according to God's word, we ask? By storing it up in your heart, replies our teacher in verse 11. When my family and I moved into our present house, there was initially not much storage space in the kitchen for food items.

So after a few months, we had a large capacity cupboard fitted with five wide and deep shelves in it. I call it Mother Hubbard's cupboard. Though my wife calls it the larder cupboard.

It's a bit like Aladdin's cave. There's everything in it that a hungry man could desire. Five types of pasta, porridge oatmeal, tins of butter beans and tomatoes, horseradish sauce, chocolate biscuits, sugar and spice, and all things nice.

But that cupboard needs to be regularly stocked up and stored up and replenished. Every week, I discover fresh items find their way into it. Now, our minds and hearts are like a large capacity storage cupboard.

[9 : 48] There is a lot of stuff in there. Look at all the brains here. There's a lot of stuff stored up, isn't there? Any of us could talk at some length about the things that we find particularly interesting, the things that we've got to know about.

So, for example, somebody here, many of you here, I'm sure, are expert bakers. I'm not, but you are. You could talk for half an hour about flour and sugar, about yeast and eggs and oven temperatures.

Why? Because you've learned through experience and long years of practice. You are a practiced baker. Your mind is full of stored items of information about the art and craft of baking.

Now, the human mind has a great capacity for storing up God's words. And just as the baker learns and retains information through long years of practice, so we learn and retain God's words, not simply by reading them, but by practicing what they teach.

So, for example, God says to us, don't commit adultery. It's a very short commandment, isn't it? We can learn that commandment verbally in just a moment. But it's only by long years of practicing it and obeying it that we come to understand it deeply.

[11 : 06] The words of God are to be stored up in our hearts for the very practical purpose, verse 11, of not sinning against the Lord. They're not just there to decorate the insides of our heads.

They're there to guard our actual life, to keep our way pure. Now, this is just how Jesus used the words of God. Remember that moment when the devil suddenly came upon him and tempted him when he was very hungry.

He said, you're very hungry. If you're the son of God, turn this stone into bread. But quick as a flash from the store cupboard of his heart, Jesus replied, it is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Jesus sets us an example of how to counter temptation by drawing on the words of God, which are stored up in our hearts. Now, our psalmist is not overconfident or cocky about his ability to overcome temptation.

This is one of the delightful things about Psalm 119. The psalmist is very conscious of his weakness. And this encourages us. It helps us in our own weakness. He knows, verse 9, that to keep one's way pure is difficult.

[12 : 23] He knows, verse 10, that he is prone to wander from the Lord's commandments. He knows, from verse 11, that sinning against the Lord is an ever-present possibility.

But in these three verses, he's teaching himself the remedy. And of course, he's teaching us as well. How, then, do we stock the larder cupboards of our hearts with the word of God?

In much the same way as the expert baker stocks her heart and mind with the knowledge of baking. In other words, by reading the recipe books and then putting the recipes into practice.

Reading and practice. This is what Ezra the priest did with his Bible. Do you remember the story of Ezra? We read in that book that as he began his ministry, Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes in Israel.

So not just by reading it, but practicing it, doing it. So friends, let's open ourselves to the influence of the Bible as much as we possibly can. The regular opportunities would be church on Sunday, like today, midweek small groups for Bible study, and of course, reading it at home, sitting down regularly with a Bible passage and reading it thoughtfully and unhurriedly.

[13 : 46] If we keep on doing these things regularly over time, the cupboard cannot fail to be stocked up. We open the Bible and we open our hearts to the Bible and its powerful influence will guard our way and keep it pure.

And I think this helps us to see why the psalmist emphasizes youth in verse 9. Youth is the time when our characters are being formed. When you're middle-aged and going gray at the temples, you're much less flexible.

But youth and young adulthood, that's the time when you're learning to set the direction of your life. As the book of Proverbs puts it, train up a child in the way that he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Now, it is, of course, gloriously possible to become a Christian in middle age or even older, and to have your life at that point fundamentally reconstructed.

But most people come to Christ in the earlier years of life, and it's in these early years that we make decisions about the direction of our life. And the decisions a person makes in youth and young adulthood act as precedents for decisions that you take later on.

[15 : 06] The way we behave now sets the direction for the way that we'll behave in the future. We form decision-making habits. Perhaps I could illustrate this from my own early experience.

I've always enjoyed singing, and when I was a student, I belonged to a small but high-powered choir. There were about 16 or 18 singers in this choir, and we specialized in the wonderful choral music of the 16th century.

And for me, age 21 or 22, as I was at the time, singing in this choir was the most exciting experience. Quite a lot of you are musicians. You know what it's like.

It produced a buzz and a half, a buzz to the power of 10. The concerts we put on were usually done in soaring Gothic chapels, and that gave them a wonderful acoustic, and that emphasized the whole thing.

But at that time in my life, I was also learning the Bible and beginning to study to be a Bible teacher. Now, the choir put on its concerts about twice a term on a Saturday evening.

[16 : 09] But Saturday evening was also the Student Christian Union's main weekly meeting for Bible teaching, when experienced Bible teachers would come from afar and expound the Bible to the students.

So there was a clash of interests for me. And an older Christian friend said to me, Edward, if you're going to be serious about the Bible and Bible teaching, you need to be in the Christian Union, learning to be a Bible teacher on a Saturday night.

You need to be there to support other students in their faith. It's a question of priorities. The Lord and the Lord's work need to come first. Now, I agonized over this for several weeks, several weeks, but by the grace of God, I decided to leave the choir and be with the Christian Union every Saturday.

That, to me, was an exquisitely painful decision. It remains one of the most painful decisions I have ever made in my life. After the last concert, when I sang with that choir, I went back to my digs, and if I didn't actually weep wet salt tears into my pillow, I certainly wept mental tears into my pillow.

But I'm so grateful now that the Lord gave me the courage to make that decision. How can a young man keep his way pure, unalloyed by some kind of idolatry?

[17 : 28] Answer, by guarding it according to God's word. Now, you might say to me, but singing in a choir, it's not sinful. It's a wholesome cultural activity, isn't it?

You weren't snorting cocaine on a Saturday night. You weren't brawling in the pubs. Well, no, I wasn't. But I realized then that it was an issue for me of loyalty and fidelity. And I realized that if I could set myself a good precedent early in life, it would help me to make good decisions later.

So that very painful early decision did me a lot of good. I'm very thankful for it. So there's the first thing. How can a young man keep his way pure by guarding it according to God's word and by storing up his word in the heart?

So friends, let's open up the store cupboard and stock the shelves. Now, second, our psalmist teaches us to speak God's words with our lips.

There it is in verse 13. With my lips, I declare all the rules of your mouth. Now, just notice the sense of movement and development here. God speaks his words first.

[18 : 41] He's always the first speaker, not man. So he speaks his words. Man then listens to God's words. Stores them up in his heart. Asks, in verse 12, to be taught their meaning.

And then, verse 13, the man speaks them. So the word, God's words, begin in the heart of God. They come out from the mouth of God. They go into the heart of man.

And then they come out of the mouth of man. So what does our psalmist mean in verse 13 when he says, with my lips, I declare all the rules of your mouth.

Well, don't forget that this man, this psalmist, is a teacher. He's a Bible teacher. So he's often expounding God's words, the law of Moses, to his fellow Israelites, his contemporaries.

But he's not only their teacher, he's also their example. So he is suggesting that it's good for any believer to speak out the words of God.

[19 : 39] Now think of it, the Lord has blessed all of us with mouths. We have tongues inside our mouths, and we have lips at the doorway. And we speak many words. We're all pretty skillful speakers, aren't we?

Words of all kinds. Pass the jam, please. Isn't that a beautiful sunset? Is your dog really a chihuahua? Lots of words. But our verse 13 is suggesting the very best way in which any human being can use our lips.

And that is to speak out the words of God. So let me suggest a few ways in which any of us can do this. Not just the Bible teacher, but any of us. First, let's read a Bible passage regularly out loud at home in your own sitting room.

If you, I'm tempted to ask you to put your hand, I won't ask you. I'm sure some of you do it. But do let me suggest this. Because if you read a passage out loud with emphasis, with emphasis, it gets the truth into your mind much more strongly than if you're just reading the passage silently.

Now imagine me sitting in my armchair at home, I'm reading the passage silently. I'm in danger of falling asleep if I do that.

[20 : 58] I can tell you once you're past a certain age, you're always in danger of taking an unplanned nap. But if you don't fall asleep, you're likely just to allow your eye to skim over the words rather superficially.

But if you read the passage out loud with emphasis, you're forcing yourself to attend to it. If you're feeling sleepy, stand up and read out loud. You're not going to fall asleep if you're standing up.

There's something about reading it out loud with emphasis that strengthens your understanding and your faith. Why not try that this week? Then secondly, let's get into the habit of discussing the Bible at the table.

If you're fortunate enough to live with other people, maybe with a family or friends and so on, it's good to discuss the Bible at the table. This is particularly helpful for families with young children.

If our children can grow up in an atmosphere where the Bible and the Christian life are freely discussed in the family circle, especially at mealtimes, our children will automatically develop their own ability to speak about Bible truth without embarrassment.

[22 : 06] The book of Deuteronomy is very helpful here. God says, in chapter 6, verse 6, and this is really addressed to parents, he says, you shall teach these words of mine diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise at the table when you're out for a walk, bedtime, morning time.

In other words, let your family life be full of Bible talk. Talk about the Bible as freely as you talk about the weather or the football. And in this way, you're training your children to be unashamed and evangelistic, to speak Bible truth almost automatically.

Our language skills develop right from infancy. We learn from our parents and other family members how to articulate our needs, our feelings, and our observations.

And we can also, in a very gentle and natural way, teach our children how to articulate the truths of the Bible. Imagine a young girl at the table. Could you pass me the salt, please, Georgina?

Yes, Dad. Do you know what the Bible says about salt? Yes, Dad. Yes, we were doing this in Sunday school just last Sunday. You're the salt of the earth. Yes, darling.

[23 : 25] What does that mean? Er, stopping the rot? Yes, sweetheart. Good girl. Third, let's discuss the Bible together, not just in the family circle, but discuss it regularly amongst friends.

Because at the most important level, the Bible is always the most interesting and important and stimulating thing that we could talk about. I know we have to talk about politics and Wimbledon tennis and plastic and Mr. Trump and so on, but nothing stimulates the heart and mind like the Bible.

And the practice of talking about the Bible increases our capacity to express the truth of it. We notice this in the Cornhill training course. In the Cornhill classroom, when we're training our young Bible teachers, I'm very conscious that getting the students to discuss the Bible freely is a key element in their training.

So as a teacher, I might say to a student partway through the class, Come on, Freddie, unpack verse 17 for us, please. Now there's an initial look of panic that crosses Freddie's face when the teacher says that, but he braces himself and he launches out.

He finds that his tongue is loosened and he begins, in the words of our verse 13, to declare the rules of God's mouth. So the teacher in training is beginning to articulate the truth of the Bible.

[24 : 49] And as he does so, the rest of us listen to it with joy because the teacher is beginning to mature. The teacher is beginning to teach. So there's the second thing, speaking out God's words with our lips in different ways.

Now thirdly, our psalmist teaches us to meditate on God's words with delight. Verse 15, I will meditate on your precepts.

Verse 16, I will delight in your statutes. And verse 14 also speaks of delighting in the way of God's testimonies. Now it is possible to regard Bible reading, regular Bible reading, as a kind of chore, a little bit like washing the dishes after the meal, something you must do out of a sense of duty.

But our writer here is showing us a much better way, and that is the way of delighting in God's words. We all of us have a capacity for delight, and that in itself, in itself, is a delightful thing.

It's uniquely human. Goldfish don't express delight. Pigs squeal at feeding time, but I don't think it's delight, it's just hunger. Delight is a very human emotion, and we can be certain that it reflects something in God himself because we've been made in his image.

[26 : 14] Delight shows itself in our faces and in our hands. Our eyes light up and whiten. We spread out our fingers. We smile. We chuckle. We delight in God's words first and foremost because they tell us the truth, and nothing is quite so satisfying as the truth.

The Bible words tell us the truth about reality, the truth about God himself, and the truth about ourselves. Take, for example, the first delightful verse in the Bible, which is the very first verse in the Bible.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now, why is that delightful? Well, that verse just by itself demolishes all sorts of atheistic pomposity.

It asserts and assumes the existence of God. It knocks flat the smooth announcements of atheistic cosmologists who tell us that the universe came about because of a random coming together of atoms and molecules which happened purely by chance but which couldn't possibly have any real significance.

professor slow coach, wake up and read your Bible. Your atheistic mindset is the product of 19th and 20th century darkness. Professor, look no further than your own body.

[27 : 34] Wiggle your little finger, for example. When you do that, does it not tell you that the combined power of your brain and body is not likely to have come about by accident? Look at the tiger, professor.

Have you read William Blake's poem, Tiger, tiger, burning bright in the forest of the night? What immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry? That's a great line of poetry, isn't it?

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry. It's the immortal hand of God that has framed the tiger's fearful symmetry. Paul the apostle writing about God the creator says this in Romans chapter 1.

God's invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

In other words, the creation, in all its complexity and wonder, demonstrates the power and truth of God. It's the truth, the truthfulness of the truth that brings delight because it is so much finer and more glorious and more satisfying than the falsehoods of the world.

- [28 : 44] The Bible teaches us the truth about God. God is the creator, God the judge, the just judge, God the sustainer of the world and the universe. God who in tender mercy has shown us his face, his character in the face of Jesus.

God the savior who was willing to reconcile the rebellious world to himself at the cost of the death of his only son so that we who belong to Jesus should live forever that death should be defeated.

These truths are delightful. They are so much more to be desired than the shabby falsehoods that seek to undermine them. How then, according to our psalm, do we learn to delight in these truths?

Well, the answer is by meditating on them. Verses 14, 15 and 16 are all tied up together. It's the meditation on God's teaching that brings delight.

But this word meditation can easily be misunderstood. The meditation of Eastern religions and that has crept into British society over the last 50 years or so quite strongly.

- [29 : 55] That kind of Eastern meditation teaches you to empty your mind. So you arrange your limbs in a comfortable position. You perhaps switch on a CD of dreamy Celtic music, the sort of thing you can pick up in a tourist shop in Fort William.

and then perhaps you're encouraged to look at something, concentrate. You focus your gaze on a rock or a crystal or a photograph of kittens playing with a ball of wool.

And the gentle music drains your mind of all intelligent thought. And after 20 or 30 minutes, you feel much more peaceful, much more relaxed.

But that kind of meditation is all about you. It's about your state of mind. All non-Christian religion is ultimately about you.

But Bible Christianity is all about God. The meditation of our verse 15 is not mind-emptying, it's mind-filling. Our psalmist says, I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes, not on a picture of kittens, but on your ways.

- [31 : 06] Meditating on Bible verses fills our minds with God and it brings delight to us because God and his ways and his gospel are simply delightful. So let me make one or two suggestions as to how we can meditate on God's word.

Why not write out a short Bible passage, a verse or two, on a piece of card and prop it up against the pepper pot on your kitchen table. And every time you sit down to a meal, you can look at it and think about it.

But make sure you change it regularly. Change it every week, otherwise you'll get into a rut with it. Or perhaps you have one of those little slates or blackboards in your kitchen with a piece of chalk beside it to write down your shopping needs.

Why not add a Bible verse at the bottom? So you would read sausages, coffee, red peppers, the Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing? Another way of meditating on God's words is to ask questions of a Bible passage.

For example, just look back a page to Psalm 118 and just pick out the first verse here as an example. 118 verse 1, O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

- [32 : 24] Now ask questions about that. Here are the sort of questions we could bring to a verse like this. Why is the psalmist encouraging us to give thanks to the Lord? Ah, the verse itself tells me I'm to give him thanks for two reasons.

First, because he is good. And second, because his steadfast love endures forever. But how is God good, especially when he allows painful things to happen even to Christians?

Well, perhaps it's because behind the pain he is lovingly disciplining us and helping us to trust him in the hard times as well as through the soft times. And how do we know that his steadfast love endures forever?

Well, Jesus answers that question because he tells us that if we put our trust in him, we shall enjoy eternal life. And how do I thank him? The verse says give thanks to him.

Perhaps I better sit down right now for the next five minutes and thank him for blessing me so richly. Thank him for the gospel and eternal life, for the forgiveness of sins, for salvation, for truth, for joy, for my church, for my Christian friends, and for the physical material blessings of life as well, for my food, my bed, my kitchen table, for the summer sunshine and the winter rain, for gas, oil, and electricity.

[33 : 48] And who am I thanking? The Lord. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, the only true God, the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And here's another question.

Do I have a thankful heart? Or am I a bit of a grumbler and a grouser by nature? How can I develop a more deeply thankful approach to life? The questions go on.

They're endless, aren't they? But in questioning a text like that, we begin to draw out its meaning and its implications. We treat the text almost as a dog treats a bone.

We chew it over. We turn it around every which way until it begins to yield its treasures to us. It's good for us to question a text or a passage. Somebody might say, well, surely you should never question the Bible.

It's God's word and it should be accepted without question, surely. No, no, no. We question it reverently and humbly because we love the Lord and we want to know him better.

[34 : 51] The cynic or the atheist questions the Bible in a completely different way. He questions it because he doesn't want to submit to it. His questions arise out of unbelief.

So he says, how can these things possibly be true? How can God be known? How can you believe any of this? But the believer asks questions out of faith because we want to understand more.

We know that we can never know everything about God but we know that in his kindness he has revealed a great deal about himself. It's as though he's given us a great and wonderful territory to explore.

The territory of his own nature and character and purposes. Meditating on the Bible, asking questions about its meaning is how to advance across that great territory.

The territory of who he is, what he is like, what he has done for us and especially what he has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Well, we're nearly done but let me sum up the teaching of this second stanza of the psalm.

[35 : 55] First of all, our writer encourages us to store up God's words in our hearts. Why? To protect us in times of temptation.

Secondly, let's learn to declare God's words with our lips. Why? To help us to a better grasp of the great truths of the Bible. And thirdly, let us meditate on God's words.

Why? Because they will bring us great delight and they will help us in the final phrase of verse 16 not to forget what God has said to us.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. our psalmist writes later, how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.

Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day. we pray, dear heavenly father, that you will fill our hearts with such love for you and such love for all that you have taught us that our minds and hearts are filled with delight and that you teach us to keep our way pure, to learn more and more how to live in line with your teaching, your instruction.

[37 : 23] and we ask it in the name of our saviour, the Lord Jesus. Amen.