

4. The Shipwreck

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- [0 : 0 0] In fact, I'm going to start reading at the very end of chapter 26. The Apostle Paul is in Roman custody. He's spent at least a couple of years in various imprisonments, giving account to various officials.
- I'm going to start reading at chapter 26, verse 30. This is Paul in front of King Agrippa. Then the king arose and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them.
- And when they'd withdrawn, they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. And Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.
- And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius and embarking in a ship of Admirantium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia.
- We put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. The next day we put him at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for.
- [1 : 1 8] And putting out to sea from there, we sailed under the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. And when we'd sailed across the open sea, along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra and Lycia.
- There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria, saying for Italy, and put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty at Cnidus.
- And as the wind did not allow us to go further, we sailed under the lee of Crete of Salmone. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fairhavens, near which was the city of Lassia.
- Since much time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous because even the fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.
- But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. And because the harbour was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbour of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.
- [2 : 3 7] Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. But soon a tempestuous wind, called the Northeaster, struck down from the land.
- And when the ship was caught and couldn't face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along, running under the lee of a small island called Cowder. We managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat.
- After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing they would run aground on the Sirtis, they lowered the gear and thus they were driven along. Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo.

And on the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Since they'd been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, Men, you should have listened to me and not set sail from Crete, and incurred this injury and loss.

[3 : 47] Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong, and whom I worship.

And he said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you. So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told, but we must run aground on some island.

When the fourteenth night had come, as they were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms.

A little further on, they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.

Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go. As the day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, Today's the fourteenth day that you've continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing.

[5 : 12] Therefore I urge you to take some food. It will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you. And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat.

Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. We were in all 276 persons in the ship. And when they'd eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Now, when it was day, they didn't recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach on which they planned, if possible, to run the ship ashore. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders, then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach.

But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. The soldier's plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape.

But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship.

[6 : 26] And so it was that all were brought safely to land. Well, this is the word of the Lord. We thank God for it. A word of prayer as we come to God's word.

We pray again, Heavenly Father, that you would please help us to understand your truth and help us to live in obedient love to the one who speaks to us.

Hear us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. You are trying your best, but everything seems to be going badly.

You find yourself in a situation like that? You do often enough, don't you? You've done your best to do the right thing, and circumstances just seem to pile up against you.

It's incredibly frustrating, that, isn't it? I mean, much of the time, we don't try to do our best, and it's not that much of a surprise that things don't go well. But sometimes we really do give it our best shot, and things we think ought to go well, but they don't.

[7 : 33] It's very difficult to manage those situations. If you're an atheist, there's no great reason to expect that things will go well. It's a random universe.

Random things happen. This is just one of those random things. Frustrating, but not unexpected. If you're a Christian, however, you know this is not a random universe.

There is a good God in control, totally in control. And if you're trying to fit in with what you know of, the plans of God, and circumstances still pile up against you, sometimes that is very difficult to take.

I'm trying to do the right thing for his sake. It's going wrong. Am I mistaken about what the right thing is? Or is he not quite the God he said that he is?

Is his goodness lacking? Is his power lacking? Those questions float around uncomfortably in the back of our minds at times of difficulty. Sometimes when we're trying our best, the difficulties of life are especially hard to manage.

[8 : 49] How are we to manage such times, such difficulties? What do they say to us about God's goodness and power and about what we should be doing in the world? Well, today's part of the Bible is in many ways one of those more difficult situations in life.

We're in Acts 27. We're in a short series of studies in the final parts of the book of Acts. It's called the Darker Side of the Mission. It's full of all sorts of things about what God is doing in the world that are less than comfortable.

But very important to pay attention to lest we have a rose-tinted view of what the Christian life should really be like. Today we're dealing with that most important and everyday matter of shipwreck.

Now can I say that just as you're about to switch off, assuming that shipwreck is not what's going to happen to you in life and this has nothing to say to you, let me suggest that this is a very important story in the book of Acts and tells us very important things about what God loves and about how God works.

This is a rescue story. It's a salvation story. Especially a rescue from storm and from death. And that's very much reflected in the way the drama unfolds.

[10 : 10] It's a three-scene play, really. Let me just take you through, guide you briefly through the different scenes of this story. Scene 1, loss of hope, verses 1 to 20.

Did you notice as I was reading it from verse 1 to 20 how things just get gradually more difficult to the point of despair?

Verse 5, they're sailing across the open sea. Verse 7, it's slow sailing.

It happens with difficulty. The wind gets in the way. They have to deviate from course, verse 7. Verse 9, much time had been lost and sailing had become dangerous.

In verse 10, there's a warning from an experienced traveller, the Apostle Paul. Our voyage is going to bring disaster and great loss to ship and cargo and perhaps even our own lives.

[11 : 18] The warning is not heeded. Who is this bloke? Probably not heeded mainly for financial reasons. The owner and the pilot need to get the ship to port with the cargo in.

Verse 14, A hurricane force wind comes that makes navigation completely impossible. Verse 17, they're afraid of running aground. The sandbars of Sirtis are a long, long, long way to the west off the Libyan coast.

But there are death traps for ships, not just then but now. They throw the sea anchor overboard. They throw the cargo overboard. They throw the ship's tackle overboard.

And finally, verse 20, All hope is lost. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

You feel the tension build, don't you? It gets more and more and more difficult. And by verse 20, everybody has given up. No chance.

[12 : 25] Scene one, loss of hope. But at this point, it changes. Because a word of hope is injected. Scene two, a word that gives hope.

Verse 21 to 26. And I don't mean, gosh, it's desperate, let's all hope that things will get better kind of hope.

I mean a promise that gives real confidence to those who hear it. The promise is all about salvation. From this point onwards, salvation is in view.

Chapter 27, verse 20. We gave up all hope of being saved. But Paul speaks of the vision he's had. Verse 23. Verse 22.

Take heart. There'll be no loss of life among you, but only for the ship. For this very night, there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship.

[13 : 27] And he said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted to you all those who sail with you.

Paul speaks of a vision that he's had. An angel appearing to him. God has promised that Paul must go to Rome and that the ship won't be lost, will be lost.

Their lives will not be. Now, folks, just imagine the drama of this for a moment. In the middle of this catastrophic storm, where everybody in control thinks they're going to die, some prisoner bloke who piped up a few days earlier, saying it wasn't a good idea to go on the voyage at all, stands up and says that God is going to rescue him because he's a plan for him in particular and others will be saved as well.

I saw it in a vision. An angel spoke to me, he says. Now, what would you think? Well, a number of things you might think. How do you imagine that going down with a bunch of seafarers?

Well, that's a brave statement, isn't it? An angel has told me. But certainly by the end of this story, by the end of this story, they are all taking him with absolute seriousness.

[14 : 54] Because the rest of the chapter is about how, though it might have sounded unlikely at this point, the rescue happens just as he said it will.

And the vision proves to be true. Scene one, loss of hope. Scene two, a word that gives hope. And scene three, God's promised rescue.

Verses 27 to the end of the chapter are all about how God does precisely what he has said he will do through his angel to Paul.

And it is described in great detail. Do you notice that? Verse 27 to 44, there's a lot of it. It's described in great detail so that we are clear that it happens precisely as God has promised that it will happen.

Verse 31, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved. That's the deal. Verse 42, the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape.

[16 : 04] But the centurion wishing to save Paul kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land and the rest on planks or pieces of the ship.

And so it was that all were brought safely to land. God has done what he had promised to do through the angel to Paul.

It's a very dramatic story, is it not? Now, let me ask the question. What part does this story play in the unfolding drama of this book?

I mean, it's a good story to read and it's a good story to think about, but why is it here? And why so much detail? And why at such length? There's a lot of it, isn't there?

Just to describe a shipwreck and a storm. Well, here are a couple of observations about why this story might be here and why it's important.

[17 : 04] First observation. This story underlines that God is with Paul. God is with Paul.

And it matters that the reader of this book knows that that is true and has it underlined. Why? Well, because in this book, the popular opinion about Paul floating around at the time and no doubt also in the time of the readers of this book is that Paul is a difficult and awkward person.

A troublemaker. Turn back in the book to chapter 25 and verse 8. We looked at this briefly last week. Here are the kinds of charges that Paul regularly has to answer against himself.

25.8. Paul argued in his defense, neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar, have I committed any offense.

This is Paul, in popular opinion, lawbreaker, disrespecter of temple, disturber of the Roman peace. He's just an awkward, disloyal, aggressive, argumentative, troublemaking sort of person.

[18 : 30] And there's no doubt that that kind of bad press existed not only in the examples mentioned in this book, but all over the Greco-Roman world in the first century.

That's what popular opinion about Paul was. And this event, eyewitnessed, did you notice the we, the we in the account here?

Look, for example, at 27.1. When it was decided that we should sail for Italy, Luke, the author, says, I was there then. I'm part of the journey at this point.

The eyewitness thing is very strong. This eyewitnessed detail makes the clear point that lots of people saw these things happen.

And the things that happened were very unusual. And the fact that nobody was lost in the storm was quite amazing. And all of that happened according to the word of God that he gave to Paul.

[19 : 35] The troublemaker. The lawbreaker. The disturber of the peace. That one, God spoke to, and it happened.

Do you see? This story is a massive endorsement that Paul is on a mission from God. This person, who so often ends up in the press, imprisoned, in trouble, shipwrecked.

This person, God is with. He's not a rabble rouser. He's not disobedient to Roman rule. His obedience is, is emphasized all the way through this story.

Isn't it? Those are things that the first century reader badly needed to know. Let's develop that a bit.

It's very important for the first century reader to know that God is behind Paul's mission to the Gentiles. That's the teeth, bone of contention in these chapters.

[20 : 35] The Jewish world of the day is outraged by the fact that Paul not only speaks to Gentiles, and invites them to know God, but invites them to know God without having to become Jewish.

It causes outrage. But here we get the strong message that the journey to Rome, to stand in front of Caesar, to speak to the great ruler of the Gentile world, is a journey that God is right behind.

Notice verse 24. Look at 24 again, please. You must appear before Caesar. He's not saying, yes, you've appealed to Caesar and so you're going to.

It's you must. God's plan is behind this. Paul is on a protected journey to Rome. God is behind it.

God will not allow him to perish, whether by storm or shipwreck or snakebite. We didn't read the snakebite bit. You get that at the beginning of chapter 28. God is right behind this man taking this message to these Gentile people and this Gentile ruler in particular.

[21 : 53] God is behind him. God is with him. And God will not allow him to perish. And the reason for that is that God is a saving God.

Paul is on his way to Rome with a message of salvation. And because of that, Paul is saved himself and saves others from danger on the way.

Let's reflect on that for ourselves for a moment. We are not on a mission like Paul. I take it that none of us thinks I am apostle to the Gentiles.

You're not thinking that this morning, are you? But we are on a mission like Paul. No Christian is a missionless person. No Christian's life is not a gospel life.

No Christian's life is like that. Because God is a gracious and loving God and a saving God. You can be quite sure that God's loving, saving control is no less operative in your life than it was in the apostle Paul's.

[22 : 58] And that is what you doubt, isn't it? When all the circumstances in life start to pile up against you. When you're giving it your best shot to be a Christian.

Doing the right thing. And things get in the way. That is what you doubt, isn't it? You think to yourself, this is going very badly. Either I'm not in the mission myself, for God is not the loving, saving God I thought he was.

Don't you think that? When things are going badly in your Christian life, haven't you thought to yourself, maybe it's because I'm not a real Christian. I'm not in the game.

Otherwise it would be going better. You can be quite sure that your life is safe in God's hands if you've trusted him.

You can be quite sure that no circumstance will befall you that is not part of God's loving, saving plan.

[24 : 02] You may not be able to see how the plan works out, but God has not changed. If you die, as Paul did a few years later, at the hands of the Romans, you can be quite sure that God's job for your life is done.

I say that not with any sense of triteness, simply because it's true. Don't you worry about all the things you'd love to do before you die, or all the things you need to do before you die?

Don't you worry about those things? Don't you worry about the people who might be left after you've gone? Whether your departure will leave them hopeless and helpless?

Don't you worry about that? Well, this story says that for as long as God wants us around, as long as God has a plan for us here, we're safe as he was.

He wasn't physically safe forever. He died in the end at the hands of hostile people. But for as long as God wanted him around, he was safe, invincible.

[25 : 23] If you're not dead yet, there's more for you to do. It's an encouraging word, isn't it? I think it is anyway. I'm greatly reassured by that. Friends, God is with Paul.

Very important. They needed to know it at the time. The readers of this book needed to know it and we need to know it. For just as in the first century, so in the 21st century, the Apostle Paul is not flavor of the month.

Frequently held up as a hate figure, somebody with outrageous attitudes on women, on sexuality, the inventor of Christianity, the one who's tampered with the message of Jesus.

People love to hate Paul and say they love Jesus. We need to know that God is with Paul just as they did. Second big observation on this story.

Paul is very like his master, the Lord Jesus, in this story. This is a Christ-like story in significant ways.

[26 : 33] Let me sketch this out for a moment. The story of these last chapters of the book of Acts is highly reminiscent of the closing chapters of the Gospels.

In Luke's Gospel, Luke Volume 1, Jesus in chapter 9 sets his face to go to Jerusalem. In chapter 19, verse 21, just flip back to that, Acts chapter 19, verse 21, Paul, in the same way, decidedly plans to go to Jerusalem.

Now, after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem saying, after I've been there, I must also see Rome.

Luke Volume 1, second half, is dominated by a purposeful journey. Luke Volume 2, second half, is dominated by a purposeful journey.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus warns those with him of the coming difficulties and sufferings. In Acts, these later chapters, Paul does precisely the same.

[27 : 50] He warns that difficulties are coming. Jesus is imprisoned in Luke Volume 1. Paul is imprisoned in Luke Volume 2. Jesus is falsely accused. So is Paul.

In both cases, the politician agrees that Jesus is innocent of, that the person is innocent of the charges brought against him. Jesus in front of Pilate, Luke Volume 1, Paul in front of others, Luke Volume 2.

Despite his obvious innocence, Jesus is not released. Neither is Paul. Look at the end of chapter 26. This man could have been set free if he'd not appealed to Caesar.

We realize he's innocent, but we're not going to set him free. In both cases, political desire to please the Jewish people is very significant in that decision not to release the one in captivity.

Brothers and sisters, the similarities are overwhelming between Jesus in Luke Volume 1 and Paul in Luke Volume 2. There are so many that there cannot possibly be an accident.

[29 : 04] And this shipwreck story comes right at the end in the sort of place that the crucifixion story occupies in Luke Volume 1.

Like master, like servant. A very difficult and traumatic end for Jesus. A very difficult and traumatic episode for Paul.

Paul mentions his shipwreck in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 as one of the big things that has happened to him in his ministry. One of the authenticating features of being a proper apostle.

There is a Jesus-like pattern going on here. But there's a difference. And the difference is obvious. Shipwreck is difficult.

But it's not a product of direct hostility, is it? What happens to Jesus at the end of the Gospels is direct hostility towards him by the powers that be.

[30 : 14] This event, well, this is just the forces of nature. This is not a persecution story. And yet it occupies a very important place in this narrative.

If you plug it into being after the pattern of Jesus, this is the equivalent of the passion narrative in the book of Acts.

But it's only indirectly the product of Paul's gospel work. For most people on the ship, it's just another day at work.

Well, not quite just another day, but it's a regular day at work, isn't it? Storms and that kind of thing. I think the point is this. None of life's hardships, which are many and various, is excluded from the being like Jesus thing.

Paul's suffering is not different from anybody else in the story at this point. But it's significances because he is on a mission from God.

[31 : 27] The point I want to make is this. The ordinary things that might happen to you in life, the ordinary, non-persecutory things that might happen to you as being a Christian, can themselves be examples of how similarity to Jesus works out in your life.

most of the difficulties that happen to us in life are not because of persecution. They're not different from the things that happen to anybody in life.

You get ill. A family member gets ill. You experience difficulties at work. Any number of difficult things happen. Paul's sufferings here are not different from the sufferings of the soldiers and the boat, but they are invested with significance because he is following the Lord Jesus.

He's on a mission from God. Can I suggest to you that in profound ways this adds a note of glory and dignity to the ordinary, circumstantial hardships that will come your way in life if you're a Christian.

The cross-shaped life has suffering in it that is not directly to do with the message about Jesus.

[32 : 53] It's not only the persecuted parts of life that can be Christ-like. Let me think, let me bring this home up to date a bit.

Imagine you're going through something particularly difficult in your own life. Just cast your mind back to something you've suffered that has been particularly difficult for you at the time. Have you not thought to yourself, well, this is just ordinary everyday stuff.

Everybody goes through this. What's so special about it? You hear at the same time of somebody across the other side of the world who's been locked up in prison for being a Christian.

You might think to yourself, if I were being locked up in prison, it wouldn't feel harder than this, but I would at least know I was doing it for Jesus.

But this, the stuff I'm having to deal with now, this could happen to anyone. I can't see it as Christian suffering.

[34 : 07] Just as random everyday human suffering. Paul's shipwreck, well, he was on his way to Caesar, but I'm not on a mission from God like he was.

Well, the answer to that is no, not like he was, but you are on a mission from God if you're a Christian. Your life is a gospel life. Because you are a follower of Jesus, those ordinary sufferings are opportunity for the likeness of Jesus to be found in you.

That it's a shipwreck that gets such airtime, a random looking, forces of nature type thing, means that anything difficult that happens to you in life can be viewed as being part of the following Jesus thing for you in particular.

And can I say that at the point of suffering, that is a great comfort. For you don't have to say to yourself, well, if I were in prison for the gospel, then I could think of this as being Jesus-like suffering.

You can think to yourself, remember the shipwreck. That was suffering after the pattern of Jesus, and so my car crash, or my whatever it is.

[35 : 36] That difficult circumstance that seems to get in the way of me serving God can be viewed as the same sort of category. Question.

How do you behave when things get tough? I imagine that you're unlikely in most of life's difficulties to have a vision about the particular thing that you're going through.

You might, but it's unlikely. So you won't know exactly how the thing that you're going through is going to turn out in advance. But how are you going to respond when circumstances pile up against you in life?

It matters how you do it. Paul's response in this chapter saves lives and points people towards God.

Do you notice that Paul prays for the good of others when he's in danger? Look at verse 24. Don't be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar and behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.

[36 : 40] I take it that that means Paul has prayed for those that he sails with as well as for himself. that God would rescue them.

Verse 24 brings God's love and God's grace right to the front of the story. God is a gracious God. He loves to hear people hearing his good news, being saved.

And God's messenger shares that love for people and prays for them to be physically safe. and then instructs them boldly so that they can remain physically safe. And because he's a person deeply concerned for the good of others, his prayers for them are answered.

Notice also his calm advice, his passionate entreaties. He cares about the people in the boat, doesn't he? You may never be a martyr.

No one may write a biography of your life as a Christian. You are unlikely ever to see yourself as a spiritual hero. Your persecutions are not likely to make it to the front pages of the Christian press.

[37 : 54] Neither is the fact that you've fallen ill or died. The Christian world probably won't notice beyond your immediate church family. Many hardships, however, will come your way in life.

When you face difficulty in life, God is in control. And you have opportunity for that difficulty to mold you into the likeness of Jesus and the way you respond to that difficulty, even if it's only the sort of difficulty that everybody faces from time to time, the way you respond to that difficulty has the possibility of care for others and to steer others towards faith in Christ.

The difficult things that come to us in life, usual or unusual, are great opportunities to demonstrate confidence in God and love towards others in ways that will be useful for them in time and in eternity.

If you are a Christian, you are on a mission from God. It's not precisely like the Apostle Paul's, but it is like his.

Christian, your life is not a purposeless life. And just like the Apostle Paul's, on your mission in life, you will run into many ordinary, random-looking difficulties like this.

[39 : 31] You don't have any promise of escape from them as he did in this situation. But what you do know is that like Paul, God is just as much in control of your circumstances.

So don't say to yourself, well, it's okay for him. He was an apostle. It was okay for him because he knew he was going to Jerusalem.

He had to get through the storm. Yes, he does have a certainty here that's helpful. But let me ask you, are you any less in God's hands when things get difficult as he was?

In your time of uncertainty, you may ask yourself, how's it going to go? How's it going to end?

What's going to happen? You may be anxious about that, and rightly so. But it does not help to stop trusting God in difficulty. He is perfectly able to do exactly the right thing for you and for others.

[40 : 39] And while you're alive, you can still be useful in his service. Let's pray together. Gracious Father, often the things that happen to us in life are apparently random and perplexing, painful and difficult, and often, more often than not, unexplained, and we don't know how they're going to turn out.

We pray, however, that you'd help us to take courage from this chapter. We thank you for the way that this apparently random force of nature type difficulty is placed in a very significant point in this story.

likened by its context to the sufferings of Jesus in his death. We pray that you would help us to take courage from this, that the apparently random things that happen to us in our own lives are not accidental or beyond your concern or your control.

we pray that in them you'd help us to demonstrate love for others as Paul does here. And we pray that you'd help us to be encouraged that no difficulty in life is un-Christ-like.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.