

2. Peter learns a lesson

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[0 : 0 0] What I said was, good evening friends, very good to see you all. Let's open our Bibles now to Luke's Gospel, Chapter 5, and you'll find this on page 860 in our big hard-backed Bibles.

Luke's Gospel, Chapter 5. We're having a little series of sermons from Luke's Gospel, and we're looking at various aspects of the ministry of Jesus and how his ministry makes such an impact upon the souls of men and women.

So Luke, Chapter 5, and I'm reading verses 1 to 11, and this tells the story, Luke, I should say, tells the story of a lesson that Peter learns from the hands of his master.

So Luke, Chapter 5, Verse 1. On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land, and he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.

[1 : 2 7] And Simon answered, Master, we toiled all night and took nothing, but at your word I will let down the nets. And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking.

They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both the boats so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken. And so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

And Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be catching men. And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may he add his blessing to it this evening. Well, our subject over these few Sunday evenings is Storming the Citadel.

[2 : 4 3] That's the title I've given it, Storming the Citadel. And that's a phrase that I've borrowed from James Phillips' commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. In that commentary, Mr. Phillips speaks of the work of the gospel as the storming of the resistant citadels of people's souls.

Now that, I think, is a fine phrase because it makes the point that the human heart is a hard-boiled organ. It wants to resist the claims of Christ because it does not want to submit to his loving authority.

But as so many here know, when a person does finally become a Christian, the resistance in the citadel of the human soul is truly stormed.

The soul is overcome. The citadel is taken over. And we surrender. We run up the white flag. It's as though we say to the Lord Jesus, You are right, and I am wrong. You are the rightful king of my heart and life, and I have no right to be my own governor.

Now in this short series of sermons, I'm wanting to show from a number of passages in Luke's gospel how the Lord Jesus, by his powerful words and deeds, storms the resistant citadel of the human heart.

[3 : 56] Last week, we were in the final part of Luke chapter 7, and we saw how the life of a sinful woman was transformed by Jesus, and how she left his presence in the end, knowing that she was both saved and forgiven.

Now this week, I want to look at this very different passage, which is the first 11 verses of Luke chapter 5. And you might like to turn that up and look at them with me, if you will, please, on page 860 in our Bibles.

Luke chapter 5, verses 1 to 11. Now in this passage, we see Peter, Simon Peter, learning a lesson. But this is a lesson not only for Peter, but for all of us.

And it's a lesson about everything that lies behind the storming of the citadels of our hearts. And let me introduce it like this. If you're a Christian, you have been caught, haven't you?

You've been landed like a codfish from the North Sea. You have been captured and netted. And you're very glad that you have been caught and netted.

[5 : 02] And how did this happen? Well, it happened because certain people were instrumental in persuading you that the gospel about Jesus Christ was true.

And as you look back on your life, almost certainly it wasn't simply one person who persuaded you. It was probably several different people. and it may have happened over quite a long period of time.

So typically, it could have been the words and the example of your Christian parents if you were brought up in a Christian home. It might have been your Christian youth leaders at your church. It could have been the sermons of your minister.

It could have been various books that you read. In my own case, it was the sermons of Billy Graham or at least one or two particular ones of Billy Graham when I was a teenager. And then I went to scripture union camps down in England.

And I was helped by various teachers at the school that I went to who were committed Christians. And I read various books by Christian leaders. And over a period of time, I was landed.

[6 : 02] I was persuaded that Jesus is the truth, that Jesus is God, that Jesus is the only Savior and Lord. So I was eventually caught, netted, and landed.

Hook, line, and sinker. And I'm so glad as I look back to the start of my life as a Christian. I'm so grateful to those people who sought to persuade me that the gospel was true.

And those people who acted as evangelists to me, of course, had a purpose. They were not indifferent to my response. They wanted me to become a Christian, those scripture union leaders and those Christian school teachers and ministers that I knew in those days.

They didn't just tell me about Jesus and then say, of course, it doesn't really matter how you respond to all this. It did matter to them. They were concerned for me.

Their aim was the aim of the fishermen. They wanted to catch me. They didn't just want to tell me about Christ. They wanted me to become a Christian. Now, this is what Jesus is talking about when he says to Simon Peter in Luke chapter 5, verse 11, from now on, you will be catching men.

[7 : 14] not just telling them, but catching them, securing their allegiance to Christ. So, as Jesus sends forth, and he's still doing this, of course, as he sends forth the gospel into the world, this gospel which storms the resistant citadels of people's souls, he does it through other people, through their influence and their teaching and their conversation.

That's how we become Christians. And in this passage about the huge catch of fish, Jesus is teaching Peter, who was very shortly to become one of the leading apostles, he's teaching Peter about his life's future work.

But this is not only a lesson about Peter's work, it's a lesson for all of us about the church's work. Peter was to catch men, and we too, if we belong to Jesus, are charged with the wonderful responsibility of catching men and women and boys and girls to be followers of Jesus.

Now, we'll get into the detail of the passage in just a moment, but let me say one other thing to help us to see what Luke the evangelist is saying to his readers about Jesus. Luke is showing us that in the person of Jesus, the kingdom of God is arriving at the doorstep of this poor old sinful world in power.

Luke wants us to see that the arrival of Jesus marks a glorious new beginning to the life of the world. Look with me back to chapter 4, verse 43.

[8 : 48] Let me read that verse, 443. He said to them, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose. So here's Jesus speaking about the reason why he came.

I was sent into the world, he says, to preach, to announce the good news of the kingdom of God, that God's kingdom is now here and it's here in the person of the king.

And then look at the first three sections of chapter 5. In each section, Jesus does something which confounds and astonishes those who were supposed to be experts in various fields.

So in verses 1 to 11, he shows how he understands something about fishing and fish, which Peter, the expert fisherman, didn't. Jesus knows how to catch fish.

And then in verses 12 to 16, Jesus shows that he can do something which the Jewish priests could not do. They were experts at diagnosing leprosy and they knew everything that could be known about the rituals prescribed in the law of Moses for dealing with lepers.

[9 : 57] But they couldn't cure leprosy and yet Jesus could and did. he did what the experts were powerless to do. And then look at the next story in verses 17 to 26.

Now the experts in this paragraph were not the priests but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And they were highly trained Bible scholars and they loved to engage in debate about theological topics such as the forgiveness of sins.

They were great talkers, these Pharisees and teachers of the law. There were quite a number of donkeys in Israel who'd lost a rear leg because the Pharisees and teachers of the law had talked the hind legs off so many people or donkeys.

They could talk subjects backwards and forwards for hours on end but what they could not do was declare somebody forgiven. And yet Jesus could and he did.

Look at verse 20 here in chapter 5. Man, he says, your sins are forgiven you. And they were. Not even the cleverest expert in the law of Moses could forgive a person's sins.

[11 : 04] So Luke is showing us in this early part of his gospel that with the arrival of Jesus something qualitatively new has come into the world. The world has been in the grip of sin and sickness and death ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

But now, at last, someone has come into this world who can deal with sickness and death and sin in a way that the resident experts were powerless to do.

So to go back to chapter 4, verse 43, the good news of the kingdom of God is the news that there is such a kingdom. The kingdom that we know so well, the kingdom of this broken down old world, is not the only kingdom there is.

There's another kingdom, a far greater kingdom, ruled over by the Lord God and his son Jesus Christ, a kingdom characterized by love, forgiveness, peace, and joy, a kingdom in which God the Father and the Lord Jesus are loved and adored and worshipped.

What a different kind of kingdom the kingdom of God is from the old order that we know so well. This present world, we do know it pretty well, don't we?

[12 : 19] It is characterized by disorder and strife and greed. Greed. Think BBC News for a moment. Greed, murder, oppression, injustice, hatred, violence, deceit, robbery, and every kind of malfunction and dysfunction.

And it all leads finally to death and hell. And what Jesus has come to do is to rescue people, his beloved people, from this terrible mess and to bring those rescued people into his eternal kingdom.

kingdom. That's why each one of us needs to be caught like a fish, landed and netted. Netted not to be killed and eaten, but netted to be saved and preserved and to come into his eternal kingdom.

And to achieve this great goal of saving many people, Jesus taught first Peter, then the other apostles, and then countless other Christians that their wonderful life-saving task was to be the task of catching men and women.

Now I hope that gives us a little bit of context in which to place this first paragraph of chapter 5 in which Jesus teaches Peter a basic lesson to prepare him for his life's work.

[13 : 36] So let's look at the details when I have taken a little sip of water. There's a very small frog that's somewhere between my larynx and my Adam's apple.

I hope he's not about to breed. So let's look at the details here now. In the last verse, very last verse of chapter 4, Luke shows us that Jesus was preaching in the synagogues.

But he didn't just do his preaching and teaching indoors. He also frequently taught outside in the open air. And we find him doing just that at the beginning of chapter 5. In fact, in verse 1 of chapter 5, we find that he's teaching on the beach, standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee.

Now, I've never been to the Sea of Galilee. I've seen pictures of it. But it's a beautiful inland lake, a lake of fresh water and full of fish. It's not quite circular in shape.

It's a little bit shaped like this, a bit like a peanut, I suppose, something like that. It's longer that way from north to south than it is from east to west, about 10 miles from north to south, about 6 miles across from east to west.

[14 : 46] Into its top end, its northern end, there runs the upper River Jordan and out of its southern end runs the lower part of the River Jordan and that runs due southwards for another 50 or 60 miles until it flows finally into the Dead Sea.

And if you like maps and geography, you might be interested to know that the Sea of Galilee is 695 feet below sea level. That's pretty far down, isn't it?

The Dead Sea is even further down, about 1300 feet below sea level. That doesn't have much bearing on Luke chapter 5, but it's quite fun, quite fun to get a bit of Bible geography into our system.

It brings it all to life. Anyway, as verse 1 says, Jesus was standing beside the lake and a crowd of people, says verse 1, was pressing in on him to hear the word of God.

And obviously, Jesus was physically uncomfortable with this. There he is on the beach, just picture him, with his back to the water, and the people are surging forward to hear him talking about the kingdom of God.

[15 : 49] And Jesus wants and needs to be seen and heard. As we teach our Cornhill students who are learning to be preachers, the preacher needs to be both visible and audible.

Every syllable needs to be heard. Duh. Clearly. So, that's what Jesus wants. He wants the people to be able to see him and hear him. So, in verse 2, he sees two empty boats.

And he quickly realizes that he can use one of these boats as a water-borne pulpit. So, he climbs into Simon's. Now, we mustn't think that he and Simon knew nothing about each other at this stage.

Just look back to chapter 4, verse 38, where he goes into Simon's house at Capernaum and he heals his mother-in-law. So, he already knew Simon Peter and that's why it wasn't difficult for him to ask Simon if Simon would hop into the boat with him and row him a few yards out into the water.

And then, Luke tells us in verse 3, Jesus sat down. It is always wise, friends, to sit when you're in a small boat.

[16 : 59] What's the old song? Sit down, sit down, sit down, you're rocking the boat. Well, you know the reason. But Jesus didn't only sit for his own safety and comfort. The real reason why he sat down was to indicate that he was now teaching.

That was the teacher's mode in first century Jewish culture. The teacher sat. It's the other way around in our culture. The teacher at the front of the class at school, in the classroom, the lecturer, the preacher, generally stands.

But in those days, you sat down to teach. So, Jesus sits and teaches, but you'll see that Luke does not record a single word of this sermon. He records other sermons carefully, but he doesn't record this one because Luke is interested in something else at this point, namely, the events recorded in verses 4 to 11.

Now, just try and build up in your mind's eye a picture of this scene. There's the boat, 10, 15 yards out into the water. Jesus is sitting in it and Peter is beside him, I guess, with his hands resting on the oars.

And Jesus is looking at this great crowd of people that he's been teaching about the kingdom of God. Some of them sitting on the beach at the very front, others towards the back would be standing up.

[18 : 13] Men and women and children, all of them more or less clueless about the kingdom of God. And yet Jesus yearns for them and loves them. He wants to gather them into his kingdom where they will be eternally safe.

He wants to gather them out of this wicked world into his eternal kingdom. Later on in Luke's gospel, he says to the people of Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

That's what he felt like when he saw great crowds of people. He wanted them to come to him, to learn to trust him and to follow him. He wanted, to use the fishing metaphor, to see all these people caught, landed and netted for the kingdom.

And it was the natural metaphor for him to use at this point because there he was in a fishing boat and there was a fisherman beside him and the whole apparatus would have smelt of fish as fishing boats do.

And the nets were there on board, freshly washed, as we learn from verse 2. So he turned to Simon Peter and he said, row out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

[19 : 24] So Jesus wants this crowd of people to be caught for the kingdom, for their eternal safety. But he also wants to teach Peter and the rest of us to become fishers of men.

Now on to verse 5. Peter is only thinking fish at this stage. He hasn't even begun to make the link that Jesus is making between catching fish and catching people.

Peter is simply thinking fish. And he says to the Lord, Master, we've toiled all night and we've taken nothing. Now I don't think he's saying, you're a landlubber and I'm an experienced fisherman and I know better than you.

I don't think he's saying that he respects Jesus too much to think like that. He's simply pointing out that there do seem to be no fish about at present. But out of respect for Jesus, he then says, but at your word, I will let down the nets.

He's just beginning to learn that it's always wisest to obey any command that Jesus gives. And Luke the Evangelist means us to notice this lesson in obedience.

[20 : 35] That little phrase, at your word, it's a small phrase, but it's an important phrase. It's the obedient servant, the Christian who is at the ready, who quickly says to the Lord, at your word, I will do what you say.

So what happens next? Verse 6, they let the nets down and they enclose a very large number of fish, so large that the nets begin to break.

It is rather exciting, isn't it, seeing a big haul of fish. I don't know if you enjoy looking at photographs of fish or films of fishing. I love having a look at some of those old black and white or sepia photographs taken maybe a hundred years or more ago of fishermen in places like Peter Head and Fraserburgh.

You know, the sort of person, the hardy Scots fishermen of old with their sow westers and their bushy beards and short pipes stuck in their mouths. And there they are on board a fish and they're landing on a ship.

They're landing a great shoal of, what do they catch up there? Herring? Haddock? Whatever it is. To feed half of Aberdeenshire. Well, that's the sort of thing that's happening here except that it's, the boats are smaller.

[21 : 44] So in verse 7, they shout to their partners to bring a second boat to accommodate this huge catch. And we learn from verse 10 that their business partners are James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

So they bring the second boat as fast as they can. They pull the fish in. But the fish are so many and so heavy that both boats begin to sink. The water is threatening to come up over the gunwales.

There must have been 30 or 40 stone of fish in each boat, almost as if all the prop forwards and lock forwards of the Scottish rugby team had stepped into the boat at the same moment. Ooh, steady on, boys.

Too many pies. Now, look at what happens in verse 8. Peter is suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of how different he and Jesus are.

It's hard to know just how clearly he perceived who Jesus is at this point. But he falls down at Jesus' feet and he says to him, depart from me for I'm a sinful man, O Lord.

[22 : 47] Didn't he begin to see perhaps at this point that this is no ordinary mortal that he's dealing with? Suddenly, Peter is not the expert and he knows it.

And he feels, he senses that he's looking at somebody who is the Lord of nature, the Lord of creation. What Peter becomes aware of is not his ignorance of fish and fishing, but his sinfulness.

I'm a sinful man, O Lord, and you are not, so it's better that you depart from me. How can darkness and light coexist? We must part company. I'm simply unworthy to be with you.

Now, happily, Jesus does not depart from him. In fact, he stays right there with him and they stay together for three years or so. But then, of course, Jesus has always been the friend of sinners. That's why he's my friend.

That's why he's yours. But Peter was not only astonished, as verse 9 puts it, he was also afraid. And we know that because of what Jesus says to him in verse 10.

[23 : 51] Do not be afraid. Jesus could see the fear in Peter's eyes. Fear, such as a man feels when he catches a glimpse of the awesome purity and holiness of God.

Don't be afraid, says Jesus. Fear not. That is one of the most characteristic things that God says to people in the Bible. He says it many times. He doesn't say it to those who are hard-hearted against him because they're the ones who do need to fear him.

But he does say it to those like Peter who are learning to trust him but don't yet know him very well. It's a wonderfully comforting and encouraging message to us as we learn to follow the Lord Jesus.

Don't be afraid. Yes, it is an awe-inspiring, even terrifying idea that a human being should be closely involved with the creator of everything. But, says Jesus, don't be afraid.

And in Peter's case, Jesus goes straight on to say, do not be afraid because you have just seen an extraordinary landing of fish. I've got something far more important for you to do from now on.

[25 : 01] You're going to be catching people. No longer the Galilean sardine, but real men and real women. Don't be afraid of me, Peter, and don't be afraid of the prospect of how you are going to spend the rest of your life.

Landing fish will soon be a thing of the past. From now on, you're going to be landing men and women. Now, that's more or less the story in verses 1 to 11, but I want to spend a few minutes finally, thinking about the implications of this.

Peter is one of the twelve apostles. In fact, he's about to be one of the leaders of the twelve apostles and one of the leaders of the whole of the early church. But the apostles, I'm thinking now of history and how the Lord is working his purpose out, the apostles are chosen and commissioned by Jesus so as to set the direction for the church for all time.

So you could look at it like this, that Jesus is the initiator and the trailblazer, but the apostles are the first to follow in his footsteps, to follow his trail, and then all the rest of us follow behind, but we're still following in exactly the same pattern and path.

So the apostles learn from Jesus and we learn from both the apostles and the Lord Jesus. The gospel that we hold to and pass on to others is Jesus' gospel and the apostles' gospel.

[26 : 25] So our teachers and our examples are both the Lord himself and his apostles. So when Jesus says to Peter, from now on you will be catching men, he's not only showing Peter how to live his life, he's also showing the church across the centuries how we are to live as well.

Now to put this in a slightly wider context, this commission here to Peter in verse 10 is not the only commission that Jesus gave to Simon Peter because Jesus also commissioned Peter right at the end of John's gospel to tend his lambs and to feed his sheep.

So in John chapter 21, Peter is commissioned to be a pastor. And here in Luke 5, Peter is commissioned to be a fisher of men or as you might say an evangelist.

But because the whole church inherits the apostles' way of life and work, it means that the whole church as a body is both to pastor those who are already its people and to go fishing for those who are not yet Christians.

So Peter has this dual role of pastor and evangelist and we as a body inherit that dual role. That's why a church like ours needs to look both to its pastoral and its evangelistic responsibilities.

[27 : 49] And that's the slightly wider context. But let's get back to Luke 5, verse 10. Peter is to catch men, which of course means human beings of both genders.

And we who follow the apostles share this tremendously important task. Now, friends, here is my question. How do you feel about this responsibility that the church of Christ is to go fishing?

Are you glad at the prospect that we should be a fishing church, that you yourself might be a fisherman or fisherwoman? Or do you feel a bit uncomfortable at the idea that the churches should set their sights on catching people?

Let me voice two possible objections to the work of evangelism, and then I'll try to answer each of them in turn. The first objection is that it's inappropriate, even immoral, to try to persuade people of the truth of Christianity.

Christianity. Now just imagine that there's an articulate atheist in the congregation tonight. It's possible that there is an articulate atheist in the congregation tonight, and if there is, you're most welcome.

[29 : 02] We do hope you'll keep coming. But just imagine that at this point, the articulate atheist stands up in the gallery, and he says this, Mr. Preacher, I object, I object most strongly.

How can people like you dare to mess around with the lives of other people and persuade them that your view of life is right and their view of life is wrong? What right have you to barge into their lives seeking to rearrange their mental furniture?

Respect their integrity, man, and leave them alone. If you must believe your gospel, at least have the courtesy to keep it to yourself. Now, we would feel the force of that objection, I think, if we heard it put like that.

But I do think we have a thorough-going reply to it. Mr. Atheist, we can say, your objection would carry weight if Christianity were no more than a kind of niche market hobby interest, like growing chrysanthemums or breeding parrots in the back garden.

If it were a niche hobby of that kind, of course it would be wrong, or at least odd, to try to persuade the world to get involved with it.

[30 : 15] But it's not like that. The truth of the Bible is for all the world to hear. It is public truth. And the gospel of Jesus Christ deals with the real needs of all men and all women.

It's what everybody needs to hear. And Mr. Atheist, let me draw a parallel. When Alexander Fleming discovered the properties of penicillin, it was soon realized that penicillin and the drugs derived from it, had the power to save countless human lives.

It would have been wrong and immoral to deny the world access to these wonderful medicines. The only good and right thing was to make penicillin as widely available as possible all over the world.

And in the same way, the Bible teaches, and we believe, that the gospel of Jesus is the only answer to the plight of men. He's the only savior who can rescue us from the power of death and bring us to eternal life.

Therefore, it would be immoral and deeply unloving of us not to share this good news with as many people as possible. So this objection says it's immoral to evangelize, but we reply that it would be very wrong to keep it to ourselves, to keep this only remedy for the fatal disease of sin to ourselves.

[31 : 36] Now here's a second objection. It's a very different one. Mr. Preacher says somebody, I'm a Christian, but I don't really feel equipped to be a fisherman.

I don't know how to put the right words together. How can someone like me possibly go fishing? Now, friend, if that's what you feel, do be encouraged, because most of us feel like that most of the time.

And here's the answer to your hesitation and your sense of difficulty. Evangelism or fishing is the responsibility of the church, the whole body of Christians.

In any local church, there are likely to be not more than just a handful, maybe half a dozen or so, of people who are skillful at explaining the good news about Jesus to somebody who's not a Christian.

But all of us who are Christians can be involved, very much involved, in the fishing adventure of the church. All of us, for example, can bring our friends to church to hear the preaching of the gospel.

[32 : 37] All of us are quite capable of finding a good gospel book and passing it on to our friend to read. And all of us can pray for our friends. And all of us can encourage that little handful of gifted evangelists who belong to our company.

You can speak like this. Any of us can speak like this to a non-Christian friend. My dear Rodney, I'm a tongue-tied old bat myself. I'm not good with words. But I want to lend you this book.

Because this book will help you. And do come with me to church. You'll meet lots of Christians at church. You might find some of them quite fun. And they don't have two heads. And you can listen to the sermons and make up your own mind about Jesus.

Now, when you've done that, you are fishing. You're involved in the Lord's work. You're involved in Simon Peter's work. You haven't got to have a PhD in evangelism. All you need to be able to do is to say to a friend, come to church.

Dear Rodney, and then join me for Haggis and Chips afterwards. And when you're speaking to your friends like that and you're loving them, you are fishing. You're involved in the fishing activity of the church.

[33 : 45] And when the church lives like this, in its regular shared life, the resistant citadels of men's souls begin to be stormed. All of us here who are Christians became Christians because the Lord sent various fishermen in our direction.

And those fishermen lovingly told us who Jesus is and what he has done for us and how we should respond to him. And aren't we glad that those fishermen netted us?

I certainly am. I hate to think where I might be now if I hadn't been stopped in my tracks many years ago and brought to Christ. I'm so grateful to those who came fishing for me.

So, friends, let's rejoice in this purposeful, wonderful task that Jesus gave to Peter and gives to us in our own generation. To catch fish is to rescue those fish.

So let's put on our sow-westers and prepare our nets. Jesus said to Simon, do not be afraid. From now on, you will be catching men.

[34 : 53] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. We thank you, Lord Jesus, for these wonderful words said to Peter all those years ago.

And we pray that you will so help us and bless us and stir us up as a church here that we're able to extend the wonderful good news to many.

The invitation to come to you in repentance and faith. Please help us more and more to be a fishing church, we pray. And we ask it for your dear name's sake.

Amen. Amen.