

Biblical Guide to Suffering and Persecution

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Psalm 119

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Alright, tonight let me encourage you to open again your Bible to Psalm 119. And I know that what I'm about to share with you probably need not be shared, but sometimes it just makes you feel good to share. As you are well aware, we are wrapping up or finishing what we know is Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, we'll address that in just a moment. But if you are not aware, we live in a community that is pretty much, as far as a community, it's governed by a university down the road and what I mean by that is kind of the cycles of life and the ebb and flow of life have everything to do with whether or not we are in or out of school. If you don't believe me, try going to any major department store the first week the kids are back. Okay, y'all understand, right? We actually have to strategize. There is a very specific time in this community where you need to buy toilet paper because if you do not, there will not be any on the shelf when 39,000 students arrive in town. Well, the reason I share that with you is one of the kind of the ebbs and flows of our Bible study here is in what I call semesters. There's a fall semester, a spring semester, and there is a summer semester and typically, Psalm 119 is a little bit unique, but typically, we walk through a respective book of the Bible in each of those various semesters.

Now, I cannot make my dreams, quote unquote, come true, but I do have a hope and a desire. If you look back over the course of time, one of the great churches of old, I guess present as well, there's a little church west of here called the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. Happened to have a pastor that was there in the pulpit for 52 consecutive years, pretty long time by any body standard. But in its proverbial heyday, when you would ask somebody, because I lived in the community, "Hey, when did you become a part of the church?" They would say, "We joined in Ephesians. We joined in Isaiah. We joined in Ecclesiastes," whatever it may be. In other words, they walked through a series of just walking through the Bible, and it became so prominent within their church culture that it just became a season of life and today, we are walking through Psalm 119. In our summer semester, we're going to be walking through the book of Ecclesiastes. It's going to be a great study because you and I have, we have access to so much knowledge. Can you imagine what Martin Luther and the Reformers could have done with Google? I mean think about that for a moment. They had to travel days just to get to a library, showed up to the library and found out they had to learn a new language to read the book that was in the library. We have translate programs that do all these things for us. And so

when we talk about the book of Ecclesiastes that we're going to begin in a couple weeks, really this is kind of our theme, how do we do with that which we already know? Most of us know so much, few of us actually know what to do with it.

But tonight we're going to wrap up or begin to wrap up what we know is Psalm 119. We're going to be in the last, well actually the third and the second to the last section, we're going to begin in verse 153 and tonight something happens in Psalm 119 that to my knowledge doesn't happen anywhere else. Got 176 verses, you got 22 respective sections as you well know. Above each of those sections in most of your Bibles will either be a strange character or a word that is really weird and hard to pronounce. Those are the letters of the respective Hebrew alphabet. The original Hebrew does not have any vowels. We put the vowels in later in what we know as the Masoretic text, 22 consonants, 22 sections guiding each of these eight verse segments, and each of them as we've studied are pretty individualistic. In other words, they're almost just a topic in and of themselves, but tonight something really strange, for lack of a better term, happens is that in the third and the second to the last sections, there is a subject matter that actually bleeds over into the next. In fact, before I read of them, if you'll notice in verse 157, it says, "many are my persecutors." He talks about in verse 158, "behold the transgressors." Then fast forward to 161, a different section, "princes have persecuted me." You see how that theme carries over into the next section? That's a rarity and to my knowledge doesn't really happen anywhere else in this chapter of the Bible.

So tonight, we're actually going to combine these respective sections and I want to begin in verse 153, we're going to read just the first four verses because it's kind of the first thematic section, we'll address that. Then we're going to come back and address the idea of persecution. It says,

153 Consider mine affliction, and deliver me: for I do not forget thy law.
154 Plead my cause, and deliver me: quicken me according to thy word.
155 Salvation is far from the wicked: for they seek not thy statutes. 156
Great are thy tender mercies, O LORD: quicken me according to thy
judgments.

Now tonight, I want to address two very prominent topics, not just in these passages, but are becoming more prominent in our respective lives. How do you and I, how do we navigate a world that is increasing with suffering and persecution, suffering in the sense the difficulty of navigating life as a person of faith and the persecution which is the abject, shall we say, opposition of the dark world toward the light of biblical Christianity.

The first section is really a request. He makes the statement, he says, "deliver me, quicken me." That word quicken in the Bible, it's kind of the imagery that we have of being taken instantaneously or momentarily from one scenario to another. We know the term deliverance very well. We utilize it every day. In fact, just last night, my wife pulled me aside and she said, "Hey, So-and-so's coming in town, we need to get such-and-such." And I said, "Okay, fine." So what did I do? I went to one of the apps on my phone to which she asked, "Will it be delivered before they arrive?" I said, "Baby, the beautiful

thing is it'll be here in two days." She says, "Where's it coming from?" I said, "I don't have a clue." All I know is this, it's somewhere in a warehouse and because I push the right buttons at the right time, it will be delivered to my house. When he says deliver me, he is saying remove from me this suffering, pull away from me the difficulties that face me and do it quickly. Quicken me means if it's at all possible, can we do this in as short amount of time as possible?

There are four things in these simple verses that he desires to happen in his life in a world of suffering. The first things he says, "I need to be rescued." He says in verse 153, "Consider mine affliction." Basically, the difficulties of life. I don't know if you've noticed this, and I'm sure that you have, if you aspire, if you desire, if you have as your ambition to live a life that is marked by faith in Christ and guidance according to scripture, it is becoming harder and harder each and every day. We used to live in a culture where people didn't ask if you went to church, they asked which church you went to. Today we live in a world where when somebody says, "I go to church," they say, "Why would you want to do that?" We used to live in a world where we could find a community of believers in our respective secular fields, today not so much. We used to live in a society where faith was encouraged and it was one to be celebrated, now it is one to be removed and one to be chastised.

He says, "rescue me from this, deliver me from this." The reality is the world we live in today is not as dark as it's going to be tomorrow. Now doesn't that just put a smile on your face and say, "Well, let's go sing kumbaya"? But that is the truth. I've read the Bible to the end and though I long, we're gonna talk about this in a moment, though I long for revival, though I long for renewal, if I read the Bible, the thing I discover is this, when Jesus comes back, it's not in good shape. In fact, it is in much worse shape than even the shape that it's in today.

He says, rescue, verse 154, he says, "Plead my cause and deliver me," to be redeemed, to be purchased, to be bought. When it says to "Plead my cause," basically it's the idea we have in 1 John chapter 2 where it says we have an advocate with Jesus Christ. We need somebody to plead on our behalf because much the opposite is occurring. I know I cannot be the only one tonight either in-house or online but have you ever had this thought recently when it comes to biblical truth and that which is subscribed in scripture, that if you take a verbal stance, if you take a physical stance based on whatever it may or may not be, have you ever entertained that conversation corporately, walked away and said, "Am I the only one who believes the book? Am I the only one who sees it the way God, quote, wrote it?" He says, I need somebody. to plead my cause. I'm going to be honest with you. I have a very selfish request when it comes to living out our faith in the quote-unquote real world. You know what all I want right now? I just want an amen corner. You say, "What is an amen corner?" You've never been in one of those churches, have you? There you go, brother. Now, you know you're in one of those churches when they have a pew that is perpendicular to the rest of the pews. You say, "What do you mean by that?" Now, most of the pews, I know we have a little angle here on the sides, but most of our pews are going at one direction, right? In one of those churches that has an amen corner, there'll be a pew on the side that's perpendicular to the other pew, and you know

who sits on that pew? Whoever sits on that pew, they have one single job, and that is to amen whatever's being said. All right? That's what it's called. It's called the amen corner.

Now, I was in a church very similar to this one time, and a good friend of mine was preaching. And I mean, he was in this house, we call it shucking the corn. I mean, he was getting it, right? I mean, he was just, I mean, ripping and roaring. It was awesome. And guess what? Everybody was just stoic. I mean, nobody was responding at all. I've only seen this once in my life. My friend did this while he was preaching. He stopped. He marched in here. He said, "Amen, preacher. Say it again!" And then he kept his sermon on. Now, I share that with you, because there's a lot of times in our life, we just want somebody in our corner, do we not? We just want somebody saying, "Hey, I'm with you. You're not the only one who sees it this way."

Verse 155, "Salvation is far from the wicked." You know, I don't want to get necessarily into semantics tonight, but when we use the word revival, it's been a long time since we've seen a big one. When I say a big one, what I mean by that, yes, lives are always being transformed by the gospel, there's always movements of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but when we talk about a quote unquote major revival movement, we're talking by the quote unquote masses. In fact, you go back to the first Great Awakening, began in the middle colonies, made its way up to the north, then back to the south. In the 1700s, they had almost 2 million people come to faith in Jesus Christ. You say, "What does that mean, 2 million people? That's half the population of our state." Did you know that when the United States was formed in 1776, its population was less than Alabama today? Can you imagine half of our country getting saved in an 18-month period?

About 100 years later, there was another revival movement right before what we know as the Civil War and I'm gonna use today's numbers. Can you imagine today if 35 million Americans came to faith in Jesus Christ this year? 35 million. Let me tell you how significant that number is. That's the population of Texas. Can you imagine, what does it say here? Salvation is far from the wicked. We live in a world today that not only do not know what revival is when they find out what it is, they don't want it. It is far from the wicked. We live in a culture now that doesn't just want and desire sin, we celebrate it and we protect it.

So when we talk about suffering, there is affliction we need to be rescued from, there is this cause that we need to be redeemed and to be revived is a longing of the heart that unfortunately, at least in the flesh seems far from reality. Which leads to the last point, this realization, verse 156, "Great are thy tender mercies." Now I know I do this often, but I want to do it one more time. Let me differentiate between mercy and grace. Grace, that we just sang about, "Amazing Grace," is receiving or being given that which you do not deserve to have. The fact that you one day as a believer in Jesus Christ are going to be in heaven for all eternity, that is grace. There's nothing you can or should do to ever deserve that. Mercy is not getting what you do deserve. In other words, the fact that we will not spend forever in hell is mercy. The fact we'll spend forever in heaven is grace. That's kind of how those two work out.

Notice what it says here. It says, "are thy tender mercies." Now I'm going to ask you a series of rhetorical questions. I don't mean them to be rhetorical, but they are. Can you imagine what your life would look like if God actually gave you what you deserved? Now I'm going to be honest with you all. I'm going to be completely transparent. One of the greatest gifts of mercy that God ever gave me is I was a teenager and they didn't have YouTube. You know why? Because there would be video evidence of all the stupidity of my life. Now don't act like you're all sanctimonious out there. You know you're grateful you didn't have it either. Can you imagine? You know we live in a world, you know what shocks me today about young people? They are actually putting a digital footprint on their stupidity. I mean think about that for just a moment. Did you know that one of the most prolific presents for college graduates today, families are spending thousands of dollars to buy their children a gift that upon graduation, before they go into the workforce, there are companies that will go out there and scrub all the digital mess that they made so that their future employers can't go and find the pictures or the videos? Wow.

Again, the mercies of God. Number one, they didn't have YouTube in the 80s. That's a great mercy for me. But think about our lives. Let's look broader. Can you imagine, and I know you know the answer to this, can you imagine if God actually gave our culture what our culture really deserves? Can you imagine? Billy Graham said it years ago, and he's absolutely right. He said the way that America is going one day, we as a country are gonna have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. It was a great, accurate statement.

As we transition into verse 157, I'm going to read the latter half of this section into the next. It says,

157 Many are my persecutors and mine enemies; yet do I not decline from thy testimonies. 158 I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; because they kept not thy word. 159 Consider how I love thy precepts: quicken me, O LORD, according to thy lovingkindness. 160 Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever. 161 Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word. 162 I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil. 163 I hate and abhor lying: but thy law do I love. 164 Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments. 165 Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them. 166 LORD, I have hoped for thy salvation, and done thy commandments. 167 My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly. 168 I have kept thy precepts and thy testimonies: for all my ways are before thee.

When we deal with persecution, when we deal with those that are in opposition to us as individuals and as corporately as believers, there's a lot of layers there. There are those around the world who find themselves in great physical peril because of their faith. Here, at least today in our culture, it's not so much physical as it is emotional and mental, the persecution, the fear of "what if I actually do speak out, what if I actually do say what I

really do believe versus what they expect me to say so that I'm not offended by or whatever it may be."

So what should be our response to whatever level or layer of persecution we find in our respective lives? The first thing is this, it's a very specific attitude. Notice in 161, it says, "my heart stands in awe of thy word." Now I'm going to be honest with you tonight. I have a difficult time standing in awe of God. You say, "What do you mean?" The Bible says to stand in awe of God. It says to stand in awe of his word. Do you know to be awestruck means to be of such a disposition that you cannot speak. I have a hard time being quiet. I really do. I'm always wanting to engage. I'm always wanting to dial up. But when you are in awe of something, it means its presence in your life is so inspiring, it's so moving that you want to just bask in its presence. When's the last time we were in awe of the word of God? In fact, most of us, I'm not going to say all of us, but most of us spend a lot of our days trying to work our way around the word of God to make it say what we want it to say to do what we like it to do, but to stand in awe of his word is to be awestruck, to be silent in the presence of its majesty.

And here's this next one, verse 163. It's a passage of scripture that I adore, "I hate and I abhor lying." Now anybody who has known me personally for any amount of time will testify to what I'm about to share with you. You can pretty much do anything you want to do to me and I can work with it until you lie to me. I don't know what it is about how God has wired me. I can work with anything, I just can't work with untruth. In other words, per the illustration I gave this morning about Earl Campbell, run over me, I don't care, but at least do it while you're telling me the truth. When lying is present, you can't work with it. You just can't do it. And so what does he say? That when we're dealing with our persecutors, when we're dealing navigating this world, we need to abhor, we need to hate, we need to despise that which is untruth. In fact, you go back to 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and it's talking about the difficulty of these early believers navigating a world that was very, not only pluralistic theologically, but it was very materialistic and carnal and one of the things it says is, we have kept thy word, and we have kept it in truth. In other words, we didn't manipulate, we didn't twist, we didn't use it to our advantage. We despise, we abhor that which is untruth.

Verse 162 and 164, it tells us this, that we're to "rejoice at thy word," and "seven times a day do I praise thee because of who you are." Now one of the hardest things to do is to praise God in the midst of the pain, to praise him in the midst of the suffering, to praise him in the midst of suffering. I know at one time in my life in ministry, I'm sure at least more than one of you has heard the following story but it just bears repeating. You know, when I was in college, much like if you attended college, we had a facility on our campus. It was a medical facility, but it was not held in real high regard by the students. You know what I mean? And so why would you go to the on-campus medical facility? You only went for a variety of reasons. Number one, you went because you didn't have any money to go to a real place. Or number two, the hour in which you needed medical attention, there was not a legitimate place in town by which you, this was the day, y'all know this was before the 24 hour urgent cares and all that stuff. Well, that being said, when you go to a school that is historically of a Baptist heritage, do you know who the

doctors are at these facilities? They're retired medical missionaries. That's who they are. And so even though there was somewhat of a negativity of their proficiency, mostly just because of their age and their standing stature in life, but oh, the wisdom of these individuals. Oh, the stories that they could tell.

I remember one day I was there for just a little bump and a cut, so to speak, speaking to this doctor, a man who had spent the majority of his life on the continent of Africa sharing the gospel through the skills of his medical training. And he told the story that he got caught up in some political crossfire. He said, "You know, it's interesting that the gospel doesn't take political sides." He said, "however, when you're over in a country like that, they put you on the side that loses every time." And he said, "because of that, I was placed in an environment where we would call a prisoner of war." Now I want you to think about this, here's a man who went to some of the finest medical training here in the United States of America, could have utilized that training to have a very sumptuous, plush life. Rather than that, he made the decision to go to the continent of Africa, use those skills in some pretty dangerous places to help people understand their need for Jesus as Savior. He ended up, listen to this, he ended up in a three by three by three foot bamboo cage for years. I cannot imagine. In the process of what comes with being a prisoner of war, he lost sight in one of his eyes. He had a very pronounced walk, for lack of better terms, that had a limp to it. You can imagine all the issues he had physically because of this. He said the hardest part was not the physical torture. He said the hardest part was not the anguish of starvation and dehydration. You know what he said the toughest part about those years were? He said he didn't have anybody else to fellowship with as a believer. He was all by himself. There was nobody to pray with. There was nobody to sing. There was nobody. But I want you to hear what he shared with me. He said of all his days and of all the churches he'd been a part of, of all the worship services, he said, "Would you believe it, Jeff?" He said, "the best worship experiences I ever had were in that box." He said the best worship I ever had and one of the things that he shared with me that day once he had bandaged me up is he said, "If you will praise the Lord in the pain, if you will praise the Lord in the hard times, you'll be amazed at the richness of his presence."

He says in this verse, he says "seven times a day, I praise thee." Can I be honest? You know what? I'm gonna kind of go there. You know what that does? That one-ups the Muslims. They pray five times a day. This says seven times a day. He says seven times a day, I praise thee. So what's our assurance beginning in verse 165? He says, "Great peace have they which love thy law," and I want you to notice this next statement, "nothing shall offend them." Now you know we live in a society today that gets offended if you're not offended by what offends them, and it says here that if you focus on the word of God and you have peace in the word of God, you shall not be offended. You know what the cure to everybody who gets offended in our culture is? Give them a good old dose of the Bible because when we subscribe to it, it says we are not, quote, offended.

There are three assurances, there are three things it says can come from an attitude of an awe-ness of the word of God, a boring line rejoicing in the midst of difficulty. The first one is this, peace. Whew. Isn't it interesting that's what everybody claims to want, yet

nobody can attain. I know you're familiar with this, but on the back side of World War I, a group of nations came together. We called ourselves the League of Nations. The goal and the desire was to make sure that the war to end all wars would never happen again. Well, it didn't take long for the second verse, did it? We found ourselves in what we know as World War II, and so on the backside of World War II, we said, okay, if we just change the name, maybe things will get better. So instead of the League of Nations, we became the United Nations. Did you know, you can go back and look, did you know there has not been a moment since that the world has been at peace? Not one. We talk about peace. We throw money at peace. We claim to desire peace. But what does this verse say? The only way that you're gonna have peace, the only way that two sides that are in opposition to each other are gonna come in congruency, it has to be facilitated by the word of God. It is the word of God that we've gotten rid of in our culture today. The only instrument of peace we've got, we've gotten rid of, which means the power brokers want us fighting. Do you understand that? If they really wanted peace in the world, they would allow the Prince of Peace and the Book of Peace to be in charge. They don't want that. You say, "Why don't they want it?" Let me give you some advice. It's not in the Bible, but it should be. You ready for this? If it don't make sense, somebody's either making money or covering something up, or they might be doing both. OK, moving on.

Peace. The second thing, what's it say? "LORD, I have hoped for thy salvation." Ooh, hope. Man, that's a powerful term. That's something, by definition, is an expectation or desire for something to occur. I kind of have one of those Myers-isms in life, man's greatest expectations are rarely half realized. Why? Because often our hope exceeds reality. I know you struggle with this too because did you know, I know this is true because in just a few months, every single one of you is actually going to believe your team is going to win the national championship. You believe it. You have hope. Why? Because there hadn't been a game played yet and you think you can run the table? We're all guilty of it each and every year.

Hope. An expectation, a desire for something to occur. I want you to think about those terms put together. Can you imagine actually in this world having hope for peace? I've got news for you, if you think the secular world is going to put that all together, you're fooling yourself. If you think the power brokers of this world are going to bring peace to this world, you are fooling yourself. In fact, I've read the Bible, you know when the next time the world has peace is when Jesus splits the skies and comes down himself. That's the only time it's ever going to happen.

Last but not least, it says, "I have kept thy precepts and thy testimonies: for all my ways are before thee." You know, I say this all the time, but you know what the word "all" means in the Bible, right? It means all, every, all of them. In other words, when it says "all my ways are before thee," it means the direction for our life, the path of our life, the ways of our world, they are all before the Lord. And when it speaks of this desire or this need for direction, the response is that no matter who or what comes against us, no matter what difficulty or obstacles are faced, no matter what persecution may arise, it's basically challenging us to be agents of peace through Jesus Christ, to be agents of hope, knowing one day he will come and bring peace. And finally, no matter where our steps take us, no

matter what direction we go, if we do it according to his word, what does it say? All our ways are before him. In other words, we can have this calm, restful assurance that no matter where the world takes us, no matter the direction that it goes, no matter what lies before us tomorrow, the next day, next week, next month, that if we are walking instead with and in step with him, he guards, he watches, and he directs our ways. Whether it is the rejoicing in a bamboo cage on the continent of Africa or sitting in a cubicle in East Alabama, is the only person in the office who doesn't subscribe to the mess of this old world. Consider all of our ways.

I will stand before you tonight and say the most powerful steps in life are not the ones that lead to a podium, an accolade, or some type of earthly... the most powerful steps in life are the ones that you take and you know that you know that you are walking literally in the footsteps of where Jesus would have walked if he were in the same situation. At the beginning of the service tonight I gave you a definition of discipleship. It means to walk in the dust thereof. It means to follow so closely behind somebody that as they're stirring up the dust, obviously in that Middle Eastern context, you're so close to it you can't help but be in the midst of it. Just this last couple days, this weekend, I experienced something everybody in this part of the world has experienced. You pull out on the highway and you find yourself, you know, one of the things, I know you know this, and this is anywhere, it's not just here, you do realize that getting on the highway, the interstate in this community, is basically like entering a NASCAR race from the pits. I mean, it really is. Now, some of us consider it a fun challenge but what do you do? I know you do it because I do. You're always looking for that gap, right? You're always looking for that space. It happened to me just this weekend. I was coming around that old clover leaf and I saw that space. I said, "Aha, I got a big old space." When I finally got up on the interstate and I looked ahead of me, you know what the back of that vehicle said? "Stay back 200 feet. Not responsible for broken windshields." Don't you love that? The official vehicle of East Alabama, right? Nobody wants to follow in the dust of that truck. Why? Because it leads to death, destruction, damage, etc.

When it says here he considers all of thy ways, there is no place that Jesus is ever going to lead you that's going to be destructive or damaging, even if it appears to to the flesh. There's gonna be no place that he leads or directs you that is gonna be contrary to his word or adversarial to his purpose in your life. The problem, if you'll allow me to use the same illustration of cars, is when you get out of the clean air. You say, "What do you mean out of the clean air?" If you've ever watched a NASCAR race, there's a reason they stay in line behind each other. It's called drafting, okay? I mean, they're right behind, they got clean air, right? Have you've ever seen a car get out of the line? They immediately go to the back. Why? Because they face the opposition of what they call, quote-unquote, dirty air. Anytime, anytime, you and I are walking with Jesus and we step out from behind the dust of his steps, we're going to get that air and it's going to set us back every single time. You say, "But I don't like where Jesus is leading me. I don't like where this is heading." I guarantee you to be in the dust of his feet will take you to a better place than anywhere you'll take yourself if you step outside of wherever he is leading. Whether it be suffering, persecution, or a combination of both, these two stands as these two sections really close with this confirmation, it's just best to do it God's way.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. As we come to the close of our service tonight, I know it is Sunday night. I know that we joke about this time being the faithful few, and I'm grateful. But maybe, just maybe tonight, though you find yourself here out of habit, maybe watching online just because and you've come to that realization there's never been that time, there's never been that moment in life where you've quote, gotten in behind Jesus, you never understood or never confessed your sin condition and asked him to save you. This would be a great time to do it. In fact, the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6, today is the day of salvation. However, for most of us, we've been walking with Jesus for years. Some of you have been walking with him for decades. And there's been times where you'd stepped out from behind him and it got rough for a season. The problem tonight may not be stepping out from behind him, it is the lure, the temptation to think that by doing so it might bring a better way tonight. Can you, can I, can we just be resolute that no matter what our environment is, no matter what our culture is, no matter what the latest fad is, there is no better place to be than in the dust of the feet of Jesus.

Lord, tonight help us, help us not to be lured by what this world is selling. Help us not to be tempted by what it is propagating. Help us not to be deceived what it is promising. God, today, no matter how hard the road, no matter how tired the soul, God, no matter how strained the spirit, God, I pray you keep us focused. Would you keep our eyes on your word? Would you keep our feet right in step with you? And would we keep our eyes simply on Jesus? It's in his name we pray. Amen.