

This Is Your Life, Part 5

Ephesians 2:1-10

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Well, it's our joy today, as we look forward to taking the Lord's table, for me to invite you again to turn to Ephesians 2. I was thinking this week that one reason it's sometimes hard for us to understand the Bible is that some of the concepts we encounter there are so foreign to us and to our culture. For example, the Bible describes God as a king. Well, we live in a democracy. Most of us have never lived in anything like the rule of a king, a monarchy, and for that, on a human level, we're grateful. And yet, we miss some of the reality of what's true of the Christian life by not having that experience.

Last Sunday, John MacArthur showed us that the New Testament often uses the image of Christ as master and us as slaves. While we're grateful that that's not true in our lives, because there's nothing that reminds us of that experience that we're familiar with; there's nothing in our personal sphere of experience that we can connect to; we lose something of the power of that image.

This morning we come to another of those biblical images that very few of us have ever experienced. It's the idea of being rescued, or of being saved. My guess is, if I were to take a little poll this morning, fewer than 10%, probably much fewer than 10% of the people in this room this morning have ever experienced being physically rescued. I'm talking about a circumstance in which you could do nothing to extricate yourself, and if someone else had not intervened, you would be dead today.

It occurred to me this week that on a personal level, having experienced myself what it means to be physically rescued in that sense--to be rescued from death--I think I have a more profound appreciation for what it means to be rescued at the spiritual level. I have a point of reference. A point of contact. But fortunately, even if you don't have such a point of contact, if you've never been physically rescued; because you have, if you're a believer the gift of the Spirit, He can illumine your understanding so that you can understand it even better than if you had physically experienced it.

For several weeks, we've been studying Ephesians 2:1-10. I've told you that this is in a sense every Christian's autobiography. Every Christian's story. It describes how God, by an act of sovereign grace, brought us out of spiritual death into life. He rescued us spiritually. And throughout this entire paragraph here, there is only one message that Paul

wants us to get; and that is that salvation, spiritual rescue, is of God from beginning to end.

He tells us this story, if you will, our story, by beginning with what we were. We looked at it in great detail in the first three verses. What we were when Christ found us. Our true condition, “we were dead,” verse 1 tells us. The root cause of that by reason of, “our trespasses and sins.” Verse 2 tells us the practical results. We walked “according to,” or we walked--we lived--in step with three powerful forces in our lives. “The world,” verse 2 tells us. We walked according to the course of this world, that is, in lockstep with the mindset of the age in which we live. We walked according to the devil, verse 2 adds. That is, “according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” And verse 3 tells us, we also walked in lockstep with a third powerful force, the flesh. “We too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.” As a result of our true condition, as a result of the root cause, our trespasses and sins, as a result of the practical effects of that in our lives--the slavery that we were in; verse 3--the very last part of verse 3--tells us God's perspective of us. We were “by nature, children of wrath, even as the rest.”

That was who we were. That is the biography of every person under the sound of my voice this morning. It is either still your biography, or if you're a Christian, it is true of you before Christ. Every single person, without exception, can be described by those three verses. Paul wants us to see. He wants us to get it as he wanted the Ephesians to get it, that our spiritual circumstances when Christ found us were utterly hopeless. If we were going to rescue ourselves from the mess in which we found ourselves--the mess we ourselves had made--if we were going to rescue ourselves, we would have had to do a number of things. We would have had to raise ourselves from spiritual death. We would have had to erase a lifetime record of sins and trespasses. In the words of Nicodemus, we'd have had to go back into our mother's womb and be born and start life all over again. We would have had to free ourselves from slavery to the world, the devil, and the flesh. And even if we could have done all of that, there would have still been one huge insurmountable obstacle. An Atlantic Ocean we could never swim. A Grand Canyon we could never cross. An Everest we could never climb. Because to help ourselves, or to rescue ourselves, we would have had to satisfy the wrath of God against our sin.

And even if that were possible, even if all of those things were possible, all of that would still just get us back to sea-level. Back to the ground floor, because what is God's standard? Perfection. So if we had the power in and of ourselves to obliterate our past--to start our lives over, to reconcile ourselves to God, to make ourselves acceptable to God, we would still need from that moment forward to live absolutely perfectly. We would have to live every moment loving God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and with

all of our mind. We would have to live every moment, loving others as we love ourselves. No wonder Paul says, down in Ephesians 2:12, that we were separate from Christ, having no hope. We had no hope. We were in a situation from which we could not rescue ourselves. All we could expect was an eternity of wrath. But bless God, into the hopelessness of our situation, into the darkness of our souls, into the bleakness of our spiritual condition, God spoke the two most wonderful and powerful words in every language--the two words that begin verse 4. "But God." But God.

Today, we come to the second part of this great paragraph. We've looked at what we were in the first three verses, but in verses 4-6, we get to look at what God did. This new section begins with what John Stott calls a mighty adversative. The little word 'but' in English. In the Greek text, the word for 'but' is a tiny two-letter word. But these two Greek letters introduce us to the wonderful news of the gospel, the wonderful news of hope, the wonderful news of divine grace. The word 'but' marks a contrast between our past and our present. It marks a contrast between our past and our future. Those are all the things we were, "but God." John Stott says,

These two monosyllables, 'but God,' set against the desperate condition of fallen mankind, the gracious initiative and sovereign action of God. Thus, God has taken action to reverse our condition in sin.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his commentary on Ephesians 2 says,

These two words, 'but God,' in and of themselves, in a sense, contain the whole of the gospel.

Think about that for a moment. The gospel--it's in those two words--but God. The contrast between Ephesians 2:1-3 and the first two words of verse 4 is like the contrast between darkness and light, between white and black, between heaven and hell, between God and man, between Satan and angels, between life and death. In Ephesians 2, Paul has taken us into the past to look at what we were, and if we're honest with ourselves, as we've looked at it over the last few weeks, it is an ugly, disgusting portrait, but an accurate one. But with the beginning of verse 4, Paul reminds us of how we came to be so different today. "But God."

Now, let me warn you, that we won't get any further than those two words today. Because those two little words teach us several immense lessons about our salvation. Several immense lessons. And I want us to look at them together in preparation for the Lord's table. The first lesson those two words teach us is that salvation is a divine initiative. It's a divine initiative. In these two words, we have God taking the initiative to

reconcile sinful man to Himself. That is the heart of the gospel--God taking the initiative in salvation and it's found throughout the Word of God. If you could rewind the tape all the way back to the very beginning in the garden--what happened when Adam and Eve sinned? They went and hid themselves from God. But the text tells us in Genesis 3 that the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who would one day shed His own blood for them, came seeking them in the cool of the day and found them. God has always taken the initiative to bring man to Himself. You see it throughout the Old Testament, and you see it in vivid living color in the New Testament. It is absolutely filled with this reality. In fact, Jesus often declared that He came to seek and to save the lost. After the encounter with Zacchaeus, you remember in Luke 19 that we saw several weeks ago when Dr. Hughes was here? You remember how Jesus finishes that account? How Luke, the writer, gives us insight into Jesus and His mission. He says the Son of Man has come--this is why He came--to seek and to save that which was lost. Jesus Christ was here on a divine rescue mission. He came to seek, that is to pursue, and to save, to rescue.

One of my favorite passages, and I wish we had time to turn there but we really don't. Let me just remind you of it. In Luke 15, you have three great parables Jesus tells. And each of those parables is a picture of Christ seeking the lost--seeking lost people. The first parable, you remember, is the woman who loses a coin. It's a very valuable coin to her. She's in poverty, and she finds that coin, and when she finds it, she rejoices and her friends rejoice with her, and Jesus says: in the same way there is rejoicing in heaven over one lost sinner who repents. God rejoices when a sinner is found, when a sinner is rescued. The second parable is the parable of the man who lost his sheep. You remember, and he loses the sheep and he goes and looks for the sheep and he finds it, brings it back, and when he comes back he throws a party. And his friends come and he rejoices, and Jesus says: that's how it is in heaven. There's a party, if you will, every time a sinner repents. And then the third one is probably the most familiar to us. It's the parable of the father with two lost sons.

We call it the parable of the prodigal son, but both sons are lost. There are two sons. Both of them are lost. There's the prodigal son, with whom we're most familiar. He's the one who absolutely rebels against the father, walks away, takes what's his, goes to the distant Gentile country and squanders everything and ends up at the very bottom of life. Jesus says that son pictures sinners and tax gatherers and the worst of society who absolutely spend themselves. pursuing their sin. But the elder son was every bit as much lost. He stayed at home, but he hated his father. He resented his father. He had no relationship to his father, and the father comes out from the party celebrating the return of the prodigal to seek that son as well. You see, all of us fall into one of those two categories. We're either the worst of sinners, pursuing our sin at full pace, or we're the Pharisees, we're the

self-righteous, the religious who think that somehow we can please God. And the picture of that parable is Jesus pursuing them both. In that parable, the father represents Christ, and Christ seeking the lost, and heaven rejoicing when He finds them.

Today, God is still seeking the lost. He does so through the gospel message. When the gospel is preached, God is in that message seeking and pursuing sinners. This is what Paul said. Turn over to 2 Corinthians 5. This is one of my favorite passages as you know, and, in 2 Corinthians 5:18,

[Paul says, I have been given the ministry of reconciliation.] God [verse 19] was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the message of reconciliation, therefore [because we have this message that we've been given, it's like we're ambassadors for Christ. And it's as though God Himself were appealing through us. When we preach the gospel, Paul says, it's as if God is seeking the lost through our message. He's appealing, we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. What is the message he preached? Verse 21. It's the message of justification. God made Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

God seeking and saving through the gospel message. Today, He's still seeking sinners. He's still the one initiating.

Now this is so important to get because we have a misperception about salvation. When we think about salvation--and I mean that word "salvation" in the sense of "spiritual rescue"--when we think about salvation, our minds typically picture somebody like this. This is the picture that comes in our minds. There is someone who is on the deck of a ship and in the midst of a storm accidentally falls overboard. And this person finds himself treading water in a huge ocean in the middle of this raging storm. He really has no hope. His only hope is for God, the pilot of the ship if you will, to throw him a life preserver. And, in our perception, God does. He throws him a life preserver. And the sinner sees the life preserver hit the water a distance away, and he flails and fights and claws himself to the life preserver and he locks his arm around it and then God draws him in on the rope to the boat and hauls him to safety.

Folks, that is not an accurate picture of biblical salvation. The truth is more like this. Picture the same analogy. You have a man on a ship. He hates the captain of the ship. He hates the rules that have been laid down for him, and he reaches a point at which he wants nothing more than to be done with the captain, and so he jumps overboard in a

rebellious moment, that is part of his heart, and he fights and claws his way as far away from the ship as he can get. And then he finds himself dead. He dies in the middle of his exit. He has no life, is floating hopelessly in the storm, caught at sea, already dead. He has no ability to see his rescuer, he cannot fight his way to the life preserver. He has no strength to lock his arms around the truth that will rescue him. Instead, he is sinking hopelessly without the slightest ability to aid in his own rescue in any way. In fact, he is completely unaware that he's even in danger. He doesn't even know he needs rescue. That is what we were like when God found us. That's why the most beautiful words in the world to you as a Christian should be those little words, "But God." When we did not, when we could not initiate our own rescue, God did. Our salvation is the result of a divine initiative, "But God."

There's a second immense lesson in those two little words. Salvation is a sovereign act. Salvation is a sovereign act. In the first three verses, we were the ones acting. We were the ones doing. And every time we acted in those first three verses, it's as if we forged another link in the chains that bound us. But beginning in verse 4, God steps in. In fact, as I've told you before, in Ephesians 2:1-10 are a single sentence in the Greek text. One sentence. In verses 1-3, there is no subject. We haven't met the subject of the sentence yet. We don't get to the subject of the sentence, the doer of the action until we get to verse 4 and it's the word, "God." God is the subject of the entire sentence. God is the sole subject of the entire sentence. God, verse 5 says, "made us alive." Verse 6, and raised us up and seated us with Christ. So, God is the actor. He acts alone. This is what we've been seeing from this passage, that salvation--spiritual rescue--is from beginning to end an act of God.

Now this is very important because there are very flawed and inadequate views of salvation that see man as somehow contributing. In fact, let me give you the four basic views of how man is spiritually rescued. The first three are wrong, flawed, but let me give them to you. Number one: Man doesn't need to be rescued. The first view says, "Man's in no trouble. He's essentially good," and they sort of take this picture that at the end of life, we're going to stand before God, if they believe in God at all, and there God is going to weigh our good deeds and bad deeds, and yeah we've got some bad deeds, but overall we're good people and our good deeds are going to outweigh our bad deeds, and so we don't need rescue. All we need is to get to the judgment and God will see what wonderful people we are.

The second flawed view says that man does need spiritual rescue, but man is solely responsible for his own rescue. This view would say, "Yes, I realize that I've blown it, that I've messed up royally, that I really don't deserve heaven, but I can rescue myself from the situation in which I find myself. I'll work hard and I'll try to be a better person,

and I'll do good things, and I'll be generous with people, and I'll volunteer for various activities in the community. I'll do a lot of different things--some of them perhaps in the Bible.” This is salvation by human works, and human merit. A third flawed view says that man needs to be spiritually rescued, but--and man doesn't--isn't solely responsible for his rescue, but man co-operates with God to accomplish his rescue. This view is called synergism. It comes from two Greek words, “syn,” meaning-- s y n-- meaning together, and erg which is a unit of work. Means to work. So, working together. Synergism is working together. Neither God can accomplish salvation alone nor can man accomplish it alone, so they have to work together, and if they work together--if God does His part and I do my part, then we meet somewhere in the middle and I'm going to be spiritually rescued.

The fourth view is the biblical view. And it's that God alone can spiritually rescue man. Theologians call it, “monergism.” *Mono-* meaning “one,” *erg-* meaning “work.” One working. Only one working. God alone works to effect man's spiritual rescue. That's the significance of those two little words, “but God.” This passage makes it clear that God's sovereign act alone accomplishes our salvation. Look at Ephesians 2:5, “even when we were dead,” God “made us alive.” By grace, you have been saved, by God's doing you have been saved. Same thing in verse 8. “By grace you have been saved...” In fact, this passage teaches, as well as the rest of scripture, that all human efforts at my own spiritual rescue are futile. God has to do it. Look at verse 8. It is by grace, that's God's grace to us. That's gratuitous, free, no cost, no expense, unearned. And it's through faith, so I gained this spiritual rescue not by doing anything, but by simply believing in the God who does it. Verse 8 says it is not of ourselves. It has nothing to do with something we do. We don't earn it. We don't merit it. We don't rescue ourselves at all. It is, what? A gift. A gift of God. Over in Titus 3, Paul makes this same point. He tells Titus, listen, treat all men with respect, show every consideration. Verse 2,

...for all men, for we also were foolish ourselves once, disobedient,
deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our lives in
malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.

That's unbelievers. That's what we used to be like. That's what unbelievers are still like. However thick a veneer of civility they may have, this is the reality. Verse 4,

But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind
appeared, He rescued us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in
righteousness.

It has nothing to do with something we've done, but He did it according to His mercy. Verse 7. "We are justified or declared righteous before Him by the gift of His grace." That's how we become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Listen, God must act. God must act. He must effect our spiritual rescue. James Montgomery Boice says,

We are like swimmers drowning in a vast ocean of cold water. We are like explorers sinking in a deep bog of quicksand. We are like astronauts lost in the black hostile void of outer space. We are like prisoners awaiting execution. That's what we were like. But there is good news, (he writes) God has intervened to rescue us through the work of His divine Son, Jesus Christ.

You know it's not a coincidence that the angel told Joseph to name the child that Mary would have, the Messiah, Jesus. You know what Jesus means? The Greek name, in Greek it's Iesous, Iesous. Very similar to Spanish. And that word is a transliteration of a Hebrew word. The Hebrew word is Yeshua. We pronounce it Joshua. Yeshua, Jesus name, or Iesous in Greek, or Jesus in English--all of them mean the same thing. They all mean JHWH--the God of Israel, the God who declared Himself and revealed Himself on the pages of scripture--YHWH is salvation. He is a rescuer. He rescues people. That's why Jesus came. After he named Him, you remember the angel said in Matthew 1, "Call His name Jesus," for He will what? Rescue His people from their sins. Jesus in John 3:17, right after John 3:16, that familiar verse, says God sent His Son into the world so that the world might be saved through Him, and Jesus Himself, in John 12 says I came to save. What do we mean, save? Well, primarily in the New Testament this word group refers to personal, spiritual rescue from sin and the wrath of God that it deserves. And God acted alone to accomplish that. It is a sovereign, monergistic act. Salvation is accomplished by a sovereign act of God.

That brings us to a third immense lesson that these two words, "but God" teach us. Not only is salvation a divine initiative, not only is it a sovereign act, but thirdly, it is a comprehensive rescue. You see, if you want to see what God rescues us from, look at those first three verses. That's what God rescues us from. He rescues us from spiritual death. He rescues us from trespasses and sins. He rescues us from slavery, slavery to the world, slavery to the devil, slavery to the flesh. As wonderful as all those things are, and we did need to be rescued from them, listen carefully. None of those is what we most need to be rescued from. Christians talk about being saved, or being rescued. The question is, from what? Well, from all of those things, but the thing we most need to be rescued from comes at the end of verse 3. The wrath of God against our sins. Now, you won't hear much about this in today's world, or today's church. This is not a popular topic, but this is as true of God as His love is. This is how God describes Himself. I'm not

making this up. The same chapter that says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” ends with, in John 3:36, “The one who does not obey the Son, the wrath of God continually abides on him.” I've often described it as that character from Li'l Abner, a cartoon when I was growing up who walked around with a cloud over his head. That's how it is with us. If we're unbelievers, everywhere we go the wrath of God sort of follows us around waiting to unleash. It hasn't unleashed. You know, there are a lot of people who say, “Yeah, you know, I believe in hell, but this world is hell.” Folks, this world doesn't even come close to hell. The Bible does tell us that the wrath of God will come. This isn't it. In fact, in Matthew 3, John the Baptist says to those who were listening to him, there is a wrath that is coming, from which you'd better run. That's what he said. Flee from the wrath that is to come.

In Romans 2, you know what Paul says? This life, what you're experiencing here, is the tolerance, kindness, and patience of God. This isn't the wrath of God. This is the kindness and tolerance and patience of God. Nobody here gets what they really deserve. Not a single person in this world has ever really gotten what they deserve from God. The wrath is coming. In fact, Paul goes on in Romans 2 to say that those who fail to repent are storing up wrath for themselves in the day of wrath. There is coming a day in which God will pour out His just wrath. Not now, but then. Every sinner will stand individually before God, the Bible teaches, and will be judged justly, and then will be banished to the eternal suffering of the wrath of God. Ephesians 5:6, here in the same book, goes through some sins, and then says,

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things, the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience.

I wish I didn't have to tell you this, folks, but here's the bottom line. Every person who fails to repent and believe in Christ is storing up God's wrath. Right now, you've got kindness and grace and tolerance and mercy, to some degree. The common grace that God shows all His creatures. But there's coming a day that God says is the day of My wrath, and you better run.

If you want a real picture of it, turn to Revelation 20. Here's the closest the Bible gets to portraying that awful day--the day of God's wrath. Let me set this up for you. In verse 11 there's a great white throne, and Him who sat on it, by the way, is Jesus Christ. Jesus said all judgment the Father has committed to the Son. This is Jesus Christ sitting on a throne from whose presence earth and heaven fled away and there was found no place for them. In other words, that's a way of saying the present heavens and earth as we know them will cease to exist. All there will be will be God, in the person of Christ, sitting on a throne, and all of unbelieving mankind standing before Him. Verse 12,

I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened [yes, God does keep careful records. Not a single sin has ever been missed] and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. [And everybody is there, verse 13] The sea gave up the dead which were in it, death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Jesus said it's a place that's never quenched, and where the person never dies. Endless suffering of eternal wrath against your sin. That's what the Bible teaches. Every unbeliever lives his life today on death row, just waiting for the sentence to be finalized and carried out. That's the reality of what we need to be rescued from. That's what we need to be saved from. But God in His grace has made a way for us to escape His wrath and the punishment that we deserve, it's in Christ. Jesus, on the cross, suffered the wrath of God for everyone who will ever believe, so that there's none left for you.

Paul puts it like this in Romans 5. He says, "Having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved--rescued--from the wrath of God through Him." 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Jesus rescues us from the wrath that's coming. 1 Thessalonians 5:9, "God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining rescue through our Lord Jesus Christ." You see, what believers have to anticipate is not the wrath of God, but the forgiveness of God, the grace of God, the kindness of God. In fact, I love Ephesians 2:7. Notice he says,

...in the ages to come, God is going to show us the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Not wrath, but grace. Not punishment, but kindness. Those two little words, But God mean that our salvation is at the divine initiative. That it is a sovereign act, and that it is a comprehensive rescue from God's wrath.

The final lesson that we can learn from those two little words is that our salvation is a future certainty. It's a future certainty. Here's the great encouragement and comfort. The same God who began the rescue will complete it. Turn to Philippians 1. I love this passage. Just a few pages over in Philippians 1:6. Paul told the Philippians,

For I am confident of this very thing [and in the Greek text he uses a tense of the Greek verb that we could translate legitimately like this. "I've been

confident in the past, I am confident today, and I will always be confident of this.”] that He who began a good work in you [that's God--God who began a good work, what's the good work, salvation in you--you is plural. He's talking to all the believers there in Philippi. He's saying the God who saved you, who rescued you, who began that work in you, verse 6] will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

In John 10 that I read for you this morning, Jesus said, “I give unto them eternal life, and no one shall pluck them out of my hand.” You will be rescued. It is a future certainty. On that day when we stand before God, you will be shielded from the wrath of God that your sins and mine justly deserve by the One who paid that payment--who suffered that wrath. Peter puts it this way. 1 Peter 1:5. You are protected by the power of God through faith for a rescue that will be revealed in the last time.

But I want you to turn to Jude. The next to last New Testament book, written by the half-brother of our Lord. He did not believe in Christ, in his brother, as Lord and Savior until after His resurrection, but then he did believe, and one of the letters of the New Testament were penned by him. Notice what he writes in verse 24 of his little letter. Jude 24,

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory [Fearful? Worried? Wondering about judgment? No!] who is able to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever.

Jude says, listen, because of God our Savior and because of what He's done through Christ, when we stand before Him in the presence of His glory, we will not cower, and we will not be ashamed. We instead will stand blameless with great joy. No wonder James Montgomery Boice said if you understand those two words, But God, they will save your soul. He goes on to say, as Christians, if you recall them daily, and live by them, they will transform your life completely. And the rescue of our souls--where was it accomplished? At the cross. It's that spiritual rescue from the wrath of God and all the penalty of sin that we celebrate when we take the Lord's table together.

Let's bow our heads together. Our Father, we thank You for the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that He poured out His life in death as a sacrifice for us. His life for ours. Father, we thank you that He died as our substitute, enduring the wrath from Your hand that we deserved. Lord, help us to remember that that day at Calvary, there

was far more than physical suffering going on, that He was bearing Your wrath against our sin. We thank You Father, for this reminder of His death. For this reminder of how You purchased our spiritual rescue. Give us grateful hearts. Help us to love Him more, to follow Him better, and, Father, help us to live in light of His sacrifice. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.