

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Romans 1:16–17

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Romans 1:16-17 (NIV)

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

These two verses are the theme of the epistle of Paul to the Romans. They are the essences of the gospel. They answer such questions as: What is the gospel? What does the gospel do? How is the gospel received? Who may receive it? In these two short verses, Paul compacts themes which challenge our minds as human individuals. It’s been said, I think, that Paul was able as a writer—inspired by the Spirit—to state more higher themes in fewer words than any person except the Lord Jesus ever has. This great statement of the gospel is coming before people, in its first setting, probably much like you and I. Humble societies of people who by the world’s standards may not be the intellects of the day, the power brokers of the day. Many of Paul’s original audience to whom this letter first came were slaves and poorly-paid city workers. Many of the people to whom he first wrote were uncultured. But there is a lifting, elevating power of the gospel that Paul does not at all hesitate to write to an audience, which by and large may never have been challenged intellectually in their life, with a statement that challenges and probes the mind.

No matter how thoroughly you examine verses 16 and 17 of Romans 1 or the entire letter to the Romans, no matter how smart on the human scale you will ever become, there is that

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inexhaustible quality to what is here. One of the tremendous things about the gospel is that it does not talk down to us. It elevates us. It does not assume that we are ignorant people, incapable of learning or incapable of being challenged in the heart and in the mind. The gospel and the early Christians assumed that because of regeneration, which occurred in our heart, there was also, simultaneously, renewing of the mind. We were capable of following after God. We were capable of beginning to understand God's way. There was a beautiful spirit that is reflected in the New Testament, which suggests to us the way that God feels about your human potential and that He challenges us to achieve. Certainly, in kind of an elementary, introductory way, I see this about this tremendous statement that is before us in the epistle today—the challenge for our minds to reach up and grasp hold of what this apostle is saying.

What is the gospel? We have already seen in the first sermon from this letter to the Romans that Paul had defined the gospel in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 1 as a promise which God had kept. And he also had defined the gospel as the Son whom God had sent, the Son descended according to the flesh from David and designated the Son of God in power by the Spirit through His resurrection from the dead. Now, however, Paul adds to that development of the gospel in verses 2 and 3 these additional statements about what the gospel is. He says the gospel, on the one hand, is the power of God, and on the other hand, Paul says the gospel is the righteousness of God revealed.

I. First, the power of God.

In just a few short verses, as we'll see next week in 1:20, Paul goes on to articulate the power of God as it is revealed in creation. Ever since the creation of the world, His invisible nature—namely, His eternal power and deity—has been clearly perceived in the things which have been made. So if we want to get an expression within creation of the power of God, all we need to do

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is look about us in the universal system—the telescopic universe, and then use the microscope as well—to see the complexity, not only of the smallest things in life, but also the greatest things in the universe. We come to understand that whoever made all this is an incredibly powerful being. But here in verse 16, the power of God is not in reference to creation. We acknowledge that to make the heavens and the earth requires great power. But here it is in reference to our salvation for our redemption. For God has power here as well. True power in a biblical sense is not the ability to simply do anything. It is the ability to accomplish what one wills to do. Some of the ancient skeptics used to sit around a lot and discuss the question: Can God create a stone big enough that He can't lift? The paradox, of course, is if He can create a stone big enough that He can't lift, then He is not all-powerful. But if He can't create a stone big enough that He can't lift, then He is not all-creative. You can chase that around until there are many gray hairs on your head or no hair at all! The omnipotence, or power, of God, however, cannot be determined by use of such a riddle. For it is the will of God to express His power in accomplishing what He has determined to bring to pass. If you want to talk about something so elemental as power, then look at the New Year's resolutions that we made together just a few weeks ago. It takes power to see those come to pass.

In reference to the power of God, there are two ways in which we may seek God's power. One is external to us, and the other is internal to us. We would see a demonstration of power if, while I'm here today, I could call upon the name of the Lord, snap my fingers, and as I snapped them, something magically would appear right here. Where there had been nothing, suddenly there would be something there. You could sit back and say, "Wow! That's power." God has chosen, however, not to manifest His power just so we could stand back and open our mouths and say, "Wow!" He has chosen to manifest His power by giving us the effective energy through the

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Spirit to have our lives changed, to have our sins forgiven, to have death repealed through the power of the Resurrection, through having the moral power in Jesus Christ to change. We—who are second- and third-generation Christians and have never really seen in our own family the dramatic power that has been brought in change, because people have accepted Christ at an early age—need from time-to-time to get out of our family situation (and, of course, we can do this even within this church) and see how the Lord has, even with a person who has no generational upbringing in Christ, gave them the power to live.

I think of a young man in our congregation who is now preparing for the ministry and who is going to be a missionary. An outstanding young man. It was just a few years ago, while in a California state correctional institution—put there originally as an incorrigible juvenile hooked on drugs and now a rebellious man in his early twenties—but the power of the gospel reached into his life and dramatically turned him around, gave him the power to be free, the power to change. This certainly is what is involved in Paul's statement, "The gospel is the power of God." For when the gospel gets a hold of us, our lives truly change.

Paul here, in writing to the Romans, recognized that the city of Rome knew all about power. It was the capital of the Caesar. He had power to spare. But as one of the Roman historians of the period noted, Caesar had no power to change the nature of human life, the story that was on the human scene. The inability to control the passions of the human life. Over that, Caesar had no power. It is here in this area that Jesus the Nazarene accomplishes His power. And it's here in the moral area that someone has said that the dove of Christ flies further than the Roman eagle.

Power.

Paul, the writer of this letter, knows something about power. He once participated in the stoning of a Christian, and he had seen the power in that man. Not the power to deflect the stones. Not

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the power to erect a plastic shield so that the stones would bounce off him. But the power to pray as he was dying: “Forgive them, Father. Forgive them.” Paul could look back on his conversion and his change to the power in a man to forgive, a man who caught that power from Jesus, who Himself forgave. The gospel gives us power to love, power to forgive. Paul knew something about the power of the Lord in confronting the risen Christ on the Damascus road. He knew something about the power of the Lord in the ability to change his own life. Even though he continued to wrestle with the fact that he was weak and he was an earthen vessel, yet the glory of God was being manifest through his life. He was not what he was. So this power of the Lord is what the gospel is about. To believe in the gospel is to experience God’s power to change—to be forgiven and to forgive.

II. But in the gospel also, Paul says, is the righteousness of God.

Hear him saying that the gospel is the power of God and it is the righteousness of God, Paul is answering two questions: “How big is God? And how good is God?”

I like the illustration about a writer who wrote a treatise on the interrelationship of religion and psychology. He was talking about the fear that little children can have of parents. And we often don’t recognize the sheer terror that may be in a child toward a parent. He said something like this: Suppose that you were a 5-foot, 10-inch, one-year-old, and that your parents were about 30 feet tall, which is roughly the proportion that exists between a one-year old baby and his parents. Thirty feet to 5-foot, 10 inches. Suppose that in this kind of a state you found yourself in a house of vast proportions. The steps were 5 to 6 feet in height. You were frequently put in a cage to quarantine you. People called it a playpen, but you saw it as a stockade. You were forcibly sat down in a chair and made to eat things that you did not choose or even necessarily want. The windows of the house would be 7 or 8 feet above the floor, beyond your being able to look out.

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And the doorknob would be at least 8 feet up in the air, in this house where your actions are totally controlled. Every once in a while, just to have some fun, the giants would pick you up and throw you 50 feet in the air. At the last moment, these giants would swoop you and clutch you and laugh as if that were some funny game.

When we look at some of the dimensions of the universe, which I don't need to go into with you because you're aware of them, we recognize we live in a universe where there is a giant. Now how will that giant treat us? He will treat us as Father. And the gospel shows us that. The gospel shows us the righteousness of God. It shows us simply that God will do everything He can to save us that it is within His power to do without setting aside His law.

This is kind of a theological concept. It's a biblical concept. To understand it requires some stretching of the imagination as to why it is God just doesn't *carte blanche* make a decree and admit everybody into the Kingdom without the necessity of going by the way of the Cross. On the Cross, God's righteousness is displayed in that God has within His nature expressed a way in which He could save us from our sin, and therefore, on the one hand, uphold His law—"He that sinneth shall not live"—but on the other hand, support His grace. That where the Law has been broken, there can yet be redemption, or coming to Him.

One of the clearest explanations I have found on this is in C. S. Lewis's "The Chronicles of Narnia." To start off and try to describe "The Chronicles of Narnia" or the chief character Aslan, who is a lion, a representative of the Lion of Judah, the Lord Jesus Christ, is beyond my power in five minutes, let alone ten hours, because you have to read "The Chronicles of Narnia" to develop the love for Aslan. Just like you have to read the Scripture to develop the love for Christ. But in the second volume, "The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe," C. S. Lewis describes four children who are brothers and sisters who take a mythical trip from this earth into the land

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of Narnia. They fall into Narnia by walking into their wardrobe, which was made out of magic wood. In C. S. Lewis, when the term “magic” is used, it is not used to describe the world of the occult. It is the world of the supernatural. So when I use the word magic, it is simply to describe those forces and laws at work in the supernatural arena. There has been a prophecy within Narnia that winter would be broken (Narnia was under the spell of the White Witch, representative of Satan) when four sons and daughters of Adam would sit on the thrones. These four children come to Narnia, and Edmund, the younger of the boys, is an unbeliever. He has fallen under the spell of the White Witch, which gets him to do anything, even to be disloyal to his brothers and sisters. And he betrays his brothers and his sisters, creating a confrontation with Aslan. The prophecy now can’t come true because now there are only three children. At a place called the Stone Table, Aslan and the White Witch meet. Of course, the children want Aslan to do something about Edmund. But the White Witch protests to Aslan that he can do nothing because deep within the laws of Narnia and written on the table of stone since Narnia has been created is the law that the White Witch has the right to the life of the traitor. She can take that life. In respect to this, we see sort of a parable of human life that God—in respect to His law—will even keep His agreements that has allowed Satan to exist as a fallen angel. Satan will have no ability to come back and accuse God of inconsistency for treating Satan in a way that He would not treat mankind. If Satan fell because of sin, then the Lord—as a matter of self-consistency—accords man the same kind of treatment. So the White Witch says the laws of Narnia are such that “I have right over the life of this traitor.” C. S. Lewis calls this chapter “Deep Magic From the Dawn of Time.” That is to say, this law has been written from the dawn of time. But in the succeeding chapter, a chapter called “Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time,” Aslan goes to the witch and says to her, “Will you accept my life in the place of Edmund and let him go

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free?” Because Aslan was her chief enemy, she gladly accepted his life. And Aslan temporarily divested himself of all of his great powers, laid down on the Stone Table, allowed himself to be bound, and allowed the White Witch to put him to death. The children are devastated by this sacrifice. But in the morning at the sunrise, they come to the Stone Table, and the Stone Table has been broken asunder. For Aslan has risen, and Aslan, when he explains this to the children, says something like this: “The White Witch did not know a deeper law, a law that was before the dawn of time, a law which said that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s place, then the Stone Table would crack and death itself would start working backwards.”

So on the one hand is the biblical principle that the soul that sins shall die. “The day you eat of the fruit, you shall die.” That’s the principle from the dawn of time that Satan knew and could call for. It’s the insistence of the law that the righteousness of God be carried out in fair, equitable justice. The law from before the dawn of time, according to the gospel, is Jesus, the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. That a law, simultaneously, is running on a deeper channel than simply the law of justice—which allows one person to willingly stand in our stead and take our penalty, and by doing so allow himself, because He has no sin, to conquer death and shatter the stone table so death starts working backwards. That now, as human beings, we’re no longer simply dying. We all realize, on a physical level, we’re racing toward a point of death. We’re not now, in Christ, dying. We are just coming alive. Because eternal life is not conceived as something that’s waiting for us out there when we have come to Jesus, it has already begun. So in the gospel is the righteousness of God.

III. What, then, does the gospel do?

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A. Paul tells us that the gospel brings salvation. We have sung the song, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” That’s a testimony of what the gospel does. The gospel brings salvation.

I would suggest that if you were out here sitting on Newport Pier today and someone raced along down the pier and jumped into the water, yelling to you on the pier, “I jumped in here to save you; I’m saving you,” we’d sit there and look at him as if he were some kind of lunatic. “I don’t need to be saved. I’m sitting on this pier and comfortable. I’m not in danger. What are you doing, you fool, down there in the water?” But if by some chance we have fallen off the pier and were in the water and someone jumped in to save us, then that would make a whole lot of sense.

The gospel is applied to our lives in this way. If we feel that we don’t need to be saved from anything and we are comfortably sitting on our pier of life, the death of Christ on our behalf seems to make no sense. It is not in relationship to any need that we have. It is only when we come to that sense of lostness, of needing to be saved, that salvation of God can take effect. We need to be saved from being lost. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. We need to be saved from sin. Jesus’ name means “He shall save His people from their sin.” We need to be saved from the wrath of God. We need to be saved in order to be God’s child. So this gospel works at saving us.

B. This gospel also works in justifying us. Paul says that the gospel is the righteousness of God revealed through faith, as it is written: “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Or, “The just shall live by faith.” The concept involved in this is justification, a term which is used a great deal but may not be always understood. Justification we use in a sense of legal terminology. If I appear before the court on some charge, I will seek to justify myself. Justification in the Bible sense does not mean that God is proving that we are right, for we are not right. We confess we are lost. Once we have confessed that we have sinned, it is clear that we were not in the right.

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But God through Jesus Christ declares us as righteous. That is how God decides to look at us as He filters us, in effect, through Jesus. And He counts us righteous. Therefore, to be justified is not to be made righteous because of something we have done. It is belonging to Christ, and the Lord simply says, “You’re justified.”

How I understand this most simply is in the gospels when Simon begins following Jesus. From the first day Jesus says, “Your name is no longer Simon. It is Peter. You are a rock. You are a stable personality. You are a well-grounded individual. You are the kind of platform or foundation on which I can place something.” In actual fact, Simon Peter had a long way to go before he became the rock that Christ envisioned. But from the first day, Jesus justified him. He declared him something he, in actual fact, was not—but something he would become. So we see this term already in the Book of Romans, where we are called saints. The Lord declares us as being saints, although we have yet to fully arrive. If there’s going to be salvation, quite obviously it must be immediate. It must be instantaneous. It’s no good if I’m drowning for somebody to give me a book on learning how to swim. It is too late at that moment to go through a six-month course. I must have salvation immediately. And so with salvation and justification, the Lord applies it immediately to the penitent heart, to the believing heart.

IV. How, then, is the gospel received?

Paul indicates it is received through faith. Faith here certainly is more than the acceptance of fact about Jesus, because the devils believe and tremble. Paul quotes as an example of faith Habakkuk 2:4: “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” If you read Habakkuk, you find that he is wrestling with a momentous problem. Why does God not deal with evil in His land among the people? The Lord responds to the prophet and says, “I am going to deal with evil. I’m going to raise up the Babylonians, and they’re going to judge the people.” Habakkuk is

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astounded. He says, “How can you use the Babylonians to judge the Jews, because the Babylonians are worse than the Jews?” The Lord, in effect, responds to him by saying that He will, in time, judge the Babylonians, but He is simply raising them up as an instrument of His judgment. Habakkuk is astounded. He goes up into a watchtower to try to figure out what God is doing. He finally comes to the conclusion as the Lord speaks to him that one cannot get a perspective on the Lord’s dealing in the span of one generation. That if one waits, the answer will come. While waiting for an answer in respect to the totality of God’s justice and His dealings with mankind, the righteous person will simply live through that period by faith. He will believe that God will work everything out and commit himself, therefore, to God.

Paul, therefore, uses that here. It’s the same when we trust in the Lord. We really indeed trust. Faith by its very essence may not be proven. But also, the fact that it may not be proven does not mean that faith is unreasonable.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to Washington. I took Air California to do that. To illustrate the nature of faith, let’s suppose that I go down to the ticket agency and I say, “I want to know, do you have a plane that flies to Washington?”

“Yes we do. It stops off at San Francisco and Eugene, Oregon. It finally gets to Washington. It takes five hours to do it.”

“I want to go on such and such a date. Is your plane going to go on that date?”

“Yes, it’s going to go on that date.”

“How do you know?”

“The schedule says it’s going to go on that date.”

“But are you sure? I’d like to know who built this airplane. I’d like to know if the government checked out the track record of the people who engineered this plane. Are you sure that they

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fastened down every bolt and they didn't leave something out of the engine? And who is going to be the air traffic controllers in the cities we're going to pass? I want to make sure they're all properly checked out. And could you give me the resume of the pilot and copilot on board? And are you sure this plane is going to go to Washington?"

I could probably stand there a whole week and ask them questions about that plane going to Washington. And no matter how many questions I would ask them, there is no way they could ever guarantee me in advance that plane is going to go to Washington. They cannot guarantee it. Then they call on me to get on that plane on the basis of faith. Faith in the company that built the plane. Faith in the traffic controllers. Faith in the pilot. Faith in Air California. So on the basis of reasonable evidence, I get on the plane. If I'm going to stay there and ask questions, hundreds of people are going to be going to Washington and I'll never get there because I'm still unwilling to commit myself to get on the plane. Once the trip has become history, then I don't need faith any more. I simply say it happened.

Getting on board the gospel, coming to Jesus Christ, is much the same way. It is based on reasonable evidence pertaining to His resurrection, the power of change He's made in the human life, the fact that it answers our basic question, presents itself credibly to us both in heart and in mind. We can stand all day and keep asking questions, but there comes a time faith must be exercised. And faith will have its final resting point. There will come a time when faith will no longer be needed because the trip will be over and we will look back, and what was begun in faith shall end in fact.

Paul says that when we begin with faith, our experience in the gospel goes from faith to faith. The righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, or from faith unto faith. It's a way of saying that the more faith we allow God to reveal to our heart, the more faith we can have. We

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move from small faith to great faith. We move from beginning faith to mature faith. We move from little faith to lasting faith. It's a way of saying that the whole Christian life, its continuation, is made up of growing steps of faith. So here is how the gospel is received through committing oneself to it in faith.

V. Now the question is raised, who may receive the gospel?

Paul says it is to the Jew first and also to the Greek. This phrase "to the Jew first" simply means that in actual historical precedence the Jews received the gospel first. Then was given the Old Testament—the Law, the prophets, the Psalms. Paul, also, when he preached throughout the Gentile world, preached first—wherever he went—in a synagogue. That was a very smart strategy, because here were the people most acquainted with the Scripture who, if they could be brought to the Messiah, could then in turn form the nucleus, the teaching nucleus, of the new Jewish-Gentile church. So it was logical that he should go first to the Jews. So the gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles or to the Greeks. It is for all.

To say this as a principle is one thing. Where this becomes enormously exciting and powerful is to see when it goes beyond the general principle to specific concrete illustrations where we see how indeed God does accept us regardless of where we're coming from.

I read this last week a testimony by Marvin Gorman, pastor of the First Assembly of God in New Orleans, a church which in the past few years has gone from a smaller church of 200 to 300 people to several thousand. God has really given them an incredible revival. And it appears to be a revival not built on the proper use of methods and techniques, but a genuine passion of the Holy Spirit has broken out within the congregation and the pastor's life. Pastor Gorman tells the story about one Sunday night during a service, a young woman walked in wearing hot pants.

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Remember, this is the South and Pentecostalism in the South is different than some strains of Pentecostalism in the West. There's a lot more emphasis in external holiness. He has a phone sitting there, and he madly gets on the phone and tries to get an usher when he sees the young woman at the door. He doesn't get the usher. It's too late. In fact, the usher managed to negotiate her right down to the second row. Pastor Gorman is sitting there thinking, "Who is this creature that would come in and defile this holy temple of God, walking in here dressed like that? Who does she think she is?" He said he got up and preached, or tried to preach. When he gave the invitation to respond to Jesus Christ, the first person that responded was this young girl who came forward accepting Christ. After praying at the altar, as Pastor Gorman was coming away from the altar, this young gal goes over and catches the pastor, and he said: "She laid a bear hug on me and said, 'Hot dog, man! This is the best thing I've ever found in my life.'" He said he was so embarrassed, his ears were burning. But he went on to find out that this young woman was a barmaid and had never been inside a church like this. A friend who had gotten saved that Sunday morning had met this girl at a bus stop in the afternoon, and this new friend persuaded her to go to church just as she was. The young Christian said to the barmaid, "It doesn't matter what you're dressed like. These people love everybody. You're going to go to church." Pastor Gorman went on to relate that the young girl never came to church again dressed like that. But what is happening today? She married a young man who had been reached in a similar manner. Today they're devoting their life full-time to witnessing for the Lord on skid row in New Orleans.

That is this principle: the gospel to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Or, as Paul indicates, he is in obligation—in debt—to the wise and to the unwise, to the barbarian and to the intellectual.

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Regardless of one's background, the gospel includes us. So the beautiful hymn goes, "Jesus included me." And Jesus includes you in His call.

No wonder therefore Paul is not ashamed. No wonder he can say at the beginning of verse 16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of God." Sometimes when we say things in a negative way, we're reinforcing the positive. This is what Paul means here. Like when we say, "He's no dull person," it's a way of saying, "He's really bright." So when Paul says, "I'm not ashamed," what he's really saying is, "I really glory in this gospel."

The word "ashamed" here does not mean being flushed with embarrassment about the gospel. It simply means, as Paul looks at the religions of his day, the philosophies of his day—the bankruptcy morally, religiously, and politically of his day—he looks at the gospel and says, "I'm not afraid to put this alongside anything. I'm not ashamed." He was a man who was beaten at Philippi, chased out of town, smuggled out of Berea, chased out of Thessalonica, laughed at in Athens. And when he preached the same message of the gospel at Corinth, "To some it was a stumbling block, to others it was foolishness." In spite of all that treatment he had just received before he wrote this letter, he sits down and says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel. It can stand the test. It can stand the test you put to it intellectually with all your questions. It can stand the test you put to it experientially, wondering if it really has power to change human life. The gospel can take the test. I'm not ashamed of it."

Closing Prayer

We make our confession today, Father, along with that of the Apostle Paul. I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is Your power unto salvation to all of us who have faith—to everyone, regardless of station in life. We find in Your gospel that Your righteousness is revealed. You have found a way to save us, yet be consistent with the giving of Your law. We receive through faith—

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beginning with faith, we increase in faith, and we continue in faith until that day when faith is no longer needed—recognizing that as we have faith, we are declared righteous and justified by You. Let the power in nature and meaning of Your gospel soak our lives, that we would get caught up in the glory of being a Christian and following You. Lord, we just ask this in Your Name. Amen.