

THE PASSOVER PLOT?

Luke 23:44-56

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Our scripture today is from Luke 23:44-56 *“It was now about the sixth hour [that’s noon], and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. For the sun stopped shining and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit.’ When He had said this, He breathed His last. The centurion seeing what had happened praised God and said, ‘Surely this was a righteous man.’ When all the people who had gathered together to witness this sight saw what took place they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew Him including the women who had followed Him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. Now there was a man named Joseph a member of the council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate he asked for Jesus’ body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock one in which no one had yet been laid. It was preparation day and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee follows Joseph and saw the tomb and how His body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to His commandment.”*

My message this morning is “The Passover Plot.” We have just read the gospel account, the final three hours of Jesus on the cross and His subsequent burial in a borrowed tomb. These are appropriate scriptures as we enter Holy Week. But in regard to this scripture there are only two questions that really count. The first question is did this really happen as the gospels say? And the second question is, if it did happen what does it mean to me? and to you?

In regard to the first – Did it really happen – I was intrigued to read the church ads yesterday in the *LA Times* to see an ad for an LA church which promised this sermon title on Sunday morning, “Shirley McLain, Meet the Master.” You perhaps are aware of their talking about a master race, a thousand year old channel or spirit guide who leads her into profound mysteries. This minister was simply saying there is a simpler way to reality than that. It’s the gospel. Meet the master.

We come to deal this morning with a theme that has really happened. As we look at that we’re going to ask what does it mean to us in our personal life. As we glance at today’s reading from scripture we can perhaps immediately size up some things that seem to be natural and apparently real.

For example it is perfectly natural that Jesus’ last words from the cross would be this phrase, *“Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit.”* It’s a quotation from Psalm 31:5. In the first century it was a prayer that every Jewish mother taught her child to pray first. When the child began to learn to speak this was the prayer that the child learned. *“Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.”* It was the bedtime prayer of every child. Like our bedtime prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” It is natural therefore that in His dying moments in the very last words, which He would speak Jesus would pray the prayer that most profoundly marked His personality from the time He had learned human speech. Except Jesus added to it the distinctive word that He communicated in life. The word “Father.” For Jesus, God was never an abstract entity or a metaphysical being. He is personal. He is relational. He is gracious

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and He is filled with love. So Jesus takes the word “Father” and speaks into that His most natural and naked prayer.

There’s also a reality, a psychological congruence to what the centurion says about Him. “*This man was a righteous man.*” This centurion was an experienced executioner and the way that Jesus died was remarkable. No railing, no cursing, no bitterness, no anger, no hatred. Truly He was a righteous man.

It might also be said that the encounter of the crowds that had gathered by that time and after the death walked away beating their breasts seems also to be a very real kind of account. The crowd would not have been present in His hastily convened trial, which by and large was secret and accessible by those who were under the tutelage of the high priestly administration. When Jesus’ friends and partisans found that He was being crucified they ultimately gathered together and watched. They had hoped that somehow there would be dramatic rescue. So when He dies it is natural to see them walking away beating their breasts. Alas! The bitter words of resignation.

It also makes sense and it is a particular touch of authenticity to see the reactions of the women following His burial. They, no matter how great their grief, would keep a lifelong tradition of obeying rest on the Sabbath. Their human instincts told them to reach out and go to the tomb and make the proper preparation of His body that had been left out. But their lifelong religious tradition kept them in check. So they remained at home on the Sabbath. It even makes sense that Joseph of Arimathea would be a follower of Jesus. Surely among that groups of Sanhedrin He would have attracted at least one sympathetic ear. The idea of Joseph letting his tomb be made available to Jesus in that he had never laid in it also makes sense. He was not given up his tomb. If we understand anything about first century burials tombs were used by whole members of a family and a body was laid on a slab for a couple of years and when the flesh was gone, someone went in, collected the bones, put them in a jar. Then it was set in a part of a tomb and the slab was used again. So Joseph was not seceding over the title of his tomb to this Galilean. He was simply saying there’s going to be a time before I die. That too makes sense.

The only supernatural elements found in Luke’s account of the death of Christ is the darkness that was settled over for three hours and the veil of the temple which was rent in two. The other gospels tell us that it was split from top to bottom. It was high, maybe thirty feet in height and a hand breath thick in thickness. So a human being if he had been trying to rip it first of all couldn’t have torn it because it was so thick. But if it could have been torn it would have been born from bottom to top. But again if this is the Son of God dying it makes sense that the Father would choose to turn out the lights and that the veil of the temple which signifies separation of man from a holy God would now be over because He opened the way for us into the holy of holies.

We recognize however as Christians that the gospel story has been challenged. Not everybody believes it. There are those who think that it is historically inaccurate and rather than representing history represents either mythology or theology. That it may represent ideas rather than realities.

I would rather have the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection challenged than I would have it ignored. There are too many people that ignore Him, that never pick up the New Testament, and never answer the questions that are demanded of this account. But the account of the

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gospels is challenged. One of the more recent attempts to challenge the gospel story is this book that was written by a scholar on the Dead Sea Scrolls by the name of Hugh Schonfield who published some works on the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He's a legitimate scholar. He in this book, The Passover Plot, sets out what he thinks Jesus was attempting to do. He traces the roots of Jewish messianism, the belief in a messiah and does it in his opening part of the work in a three-fold step suggesting that the idea of a messiah was a developmental matter. First of all God selected the people of Israel to be His model community to the world, to be a kingdom of priests unto God which would show the whole universal family of man who the real one true God was. But unfortunately Israel failed to model the character and holiness of God. Therefore chastisements came upon them and persecutions and ultimately exile.

So God next turned to a remnant, to an elect, a group within Israel who would model His holiness so that the whole Israel and the whole world would know who He was. But even the elect failed. So ultimately there came to be the representative person, the prophet like Moses, the king like David, the high priest, the anointed one who would in His own personal life embody all that was meant for Israel and for the elect. And show all humanity who the one true God is, what He required and how to have a relationship with Him. That Messiah, that anointed one for that's the meaning of Messiah, was to appear at the end of days.

Schonfield says that Jesus knew this development within the Messiah, the development traced within the Old Testament and therefore He came consciously to fulfill that. Except Jesus added a new twist that no one before Him or since Him has added and that is that as He studied the Old Testament He became convinced that it was necessary that the Messiah die, be crucified. He based this on his reading of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 and other scatterings of the Old Testament Psalms, prophets and law and that as He looked at this Jesus became convinced that it was necessary to be opposed and rejected, be ill treated and executed, then on the third day rise again as the Psalm says, "*Thou wilt not suffer His soul to see corruption.*" Therefore in order to fulfill this personal vision of the messiahship Jesus had to plan for His own death. This He did attempting to do it in connection with the highest holy day within Israel's history, which marked their exodus from Egypt, a fitting symbol of the new exodus He would accomplish. That is that Jesus would bring about His death at Passover.

Schonfield attributes to Jesus a marvelous ingenuity. He rates Him as a genius bordering on psychosis. That He was such a brilliant person to understand the scripture and such a master of men and crowds, of friends and opposition that He could so trigger the events, using Judas as a pawn and middle man that He could actually get Himself on schedule and in accordance with His design. As He began to reveal the inner nature of His messiahship to His Galilean disciples after they confessed Him as Messiah at Caesarea-Philippi, Schonfield says, Jesus began to realize that this Galilean group was too simple to understand His complex teaching of the Messiah and they were not at all in tune to the necessity of His dying.

Therefore Jesus turned to another group of disciples not talked about, he says, in the New Testament. It's group B, the Judean group of disciples including people like Lazarus, a man named John who was a priest, the writer of the gospel of John he holds, and a person like Joseph of Arimathea. These people were smart enough to understand what was going on. So to the smart ones Jesus communicated His plan. He would go to the cross but it was important that He not die on the cross for He must show Himself to be the risen Christ and He could not do that if He were dead.

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So on the cross He arranged for them the Judean group, the smart group to give Him a drug, which would render Him in a death like unconscious state. The signal He would give from the cross and that He was ready for the drug was, "*I thirst.*" So when He said it, one of the group went to Him, gave Him sponge filled with this substance that would narcotize Him and He immediately after drinking it lapsed on the cross and Joseph of Arimathea, by prearranged signal, went to Pilate and said, "He's dead. Can I have His body?" Pilate inquired to see if He were dead. He was, so Joseph granted permission.

And everything Schonfield says was going according to plan until the soldier came along and looking at Jesus on the cross, seeing that He appeared to be dead did not break His legs as he did the others but instead put a spear in His side. That was the one thing that went wrong in the whole plan. Out of Jesus' wounded side Schonfield says there flowed blood. It's interesting that Schonfield says it was not blood and water as John says. It was blood. You see, if you admit blood and water then there's a congratulation of the system that has occurred and the pericardial sac has been broken and the inner lining of the heart has been penetrated. So there's just water because after all He's still living.

Jesus is taken down from the cross, He is barely alive. Joseph's plan was to get Him to the tomb, where in the cool recesses of the tomb Jesus could revive, get His strength back and then get out of there and recover so that the Galilean group of disciples could be told He is risen and they could go spread the story that indeed the Messiah had appeared. The day after the burial of Jesus Joseph of Arimathea and another person in on the plot went to the tomb, they opened it up. There were no soldiers according to Schonfield. He simply removed anything that would object to his plan. If it's in the gospels and doesn't agree with his plan it's simply removed.

But they go and there Jesus is unconscious and He is doing very poorly. But as they are there almost supernaturally for a moment, Jesus regains consciousness. He realizes that His plan has failed and that He is going to die. So He "uses these precious minutes to beg His friends to carry a message to His disciples. 'Tell them these things. They must believe. Tell them when I am risen I will meet them in Galilee as I said and afterwards enter My glory.' And He dies." Joseph of Arimathea gets Him out of there to another tomb where He can be secretly buried and arranges for his coworker to remain at the sepulcher so that if anybody comes to ask about Him he can tell them that He has gone into Galilee. It so happens that the man Joseph of Arimathea left at the tomb was dressed in white which explains why the grief stricken, hysterical women report a visions of an angel who says, He is not here. He is risen. The Galilean disciples come to believe the story and Christianity owes its origins to The Passover Plot.

I can take a lot of time refuting this book. In fact, as you read the book – he's a marvelous writer and he almost gets you a few times on the edge of your seat. If you're not familiar with the gospel studies it might even overwhelm you intellectually because his arguments as he works through the book seem so valid at times.

But there are several principle objections. One is how can he admit certain data that supports his view and omit any data that doesn't support his view. There's no independent objective criteria. It's simply subjective.

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The second matter to me is the death bell of the theory. This dumb group, the Galilean group, is the same group that turns around and then founds the most dynamic religious faith in the world. They weren't sharp enough to understand His inner plan. But on the basis of a man in white's report that He is risen they go out and transform the world. They go from cowards into heroes and even die upside down for the story of Jesus. I don't see that as happening. The disciples were never convinced by an empty tomb. They were convinced by a risen Lord. They were not convinced by a report that He had risen. But they were convinced by the evidence He gave them in person that He was risen. It is strange also that if Schonfield's plot is right the smart group never talked.

One of the refreshing things, however, about his book is that it shows on an intellectual level how powerful the gospel account really is. How much credence we need to give it. I know because of belief in the supernatural there are people living in our non and anti supernatural society that sort of shine it off. They argued the reason in circle. The miraculous could never occur, therefore Jesus could never do miracles or risen from the dead. Circular reasoning. But for anyone who sets down and begins to struggle with Jesus' death and resurrection as a matter of history immediately you're dealing with data and documents and evidences and witnesses. What do we do with that? Schonfield is telling me as a learned scholar (and he is a learned scholar fluent in a number of biblical languages) he's saying I've looked at 20 centuries of explanations about what happened to Jesus and I've become convinced that none of them could hold water. So here is the one that can hold water. And he gives us his view. But when it's stacked up against the gospels I think it takes greater belief to believe in the alternative than to believe in the resurrection. I'd have to have more faith to believe in Schonfield's view than to believe in the gospels straightforward account.

As a Christian we accept this account as a matter of history. Schonfield however is righting one of his fundamental assertions. Jesus did have a plan. I wouldn't call it a plot. That's a sinister word. But He did have a plan. He planned to lay down His life. He did read the Old Testament scriptures. He did have a unique view of the Messiah that no one else saw. He did consciously set out to fulfill Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. No question about it. And He did do it. And He said all during His earthly ministry that He would do it. That He would lay down His life as a ransom for many. And following His resurrection He would tell the disciples at the close of Luke 24 *"How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?"* So Jesus did have a plan.

Isaiah puts it this way, *"Surely He has taken our infirmities and carried our sorrows. Yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by His wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray and each of us have turned to his own way. And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."*

He did set out to do that. To take our iniquity. His dying for me means that He is my substitute on the cross. He's your substitute. He died for me. All of us as mortals face two deaths – physical death and spiritual death. A first death and a second death. Physical death involves separation from other human beings. Spiritual death involves eternal separation from God. Jesus, on the cross, dies both deaths – a physical death and a spiritual death so that the only death we need face is physical death and not a single one of us in this room need ever face a spiritual

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death because He died for me. He paid a price I could not pay to cancel a debt He did not owe. I owed the debt but He paid the price. Jesus' death illustrates what God is teaching us in His word "*The wages of sin is death.*"

This view of needing Christ flies in the face of our Western sophisticated sense of self-sufficiency, our attitude of "I can do this by myself." There is one thing we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot in our own strength present ourselves to God. Nor can we give ourselves eternal life. That is not within our power to give. If we're to gain those things they must be given to us by another.

We understand that principle in a scientific sense whether we're dealing with the physical sciences or the biological sciences that it is the exploits of the few that benefit the masses. If that is true on a scientific level why is it not also true on a spiritual level.

I remember as a kid I had several fears as a kid, some of them were theological, and some of them were medical. The theological fears I won't talk about right now. The medical fears, I was afraid of getting polio. How many of you who are my age or thereabouts remember being afraid of getting polio? It was an overpowering fear. Some of you in the audience perhaps had polio. What a great day it was when Jonas Salk came out with a vaccine that made it possible so that no one gets polio. Then seven years later when Dr. Sabin came up with the oral vaccine, which was sure better than getting a shot in the arm or wherever they gave it. It was the contribution of two men that changed the world for millions, hundreds of millions. You look at all the inventions that we have enjoyed. It's been through a singular person or a small band of people that had a break through that all of us then got the benefit from.

What is true in the scientific realm is true in the spiritual realm. There is only one person who could bring us to God. And it is Jesus of Nazareth. And on the cross, scriptures say He took our sins in His body on the tree and He paid that debt. When we let Him become our substitute and our savior He brings us into sonship and daughtership with God and changes our world and gives us eternal life. That's His contribution and He's the only one to do it.

I want to close with a story that I've told several times in my sixteen years pasturing. I don't think I've told this in the past five years. If I have, forgive me. We live in a culture where we don't have animal sacrifices. Sometimes we talk about Christ being a sacrifice, dying a vicarious death for us. Since we're not coming from a sacrificial, temple ritual culture sometimes it's difficult for us to get a hold of this. I have a story that happened to me when I was a kid that helped me get a hold of what it means for Christ to be my substitute.

It was about 1948. I guess I was seven years of age. I was just on the border of turning eight or was eight. Our family was living in a town in Northwest China of about 100,000 population. My parents, you know were missionaries. The town although of 100,000 population was a very primitive town. When we think of an American Western town of the 1850s that probably describes this Chinese town in 1948. No paved roads. Almost no automobiles. I don't remember one. There might have been a truck or two. But there were donkeys and a few camels and a few goats and sheep and dogs and chickens and all that sort of stuff. China in those days was very, very dirty. The Chinese people see themselves as very clean and they were. As a kid I loved the dirt streets, the dirt floors, the dirt houses. I only had to take a bath once a week. It

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was marvelous to live in dirt! I don't feel that way any more, understand, but that's the way I felt as a kid. Every child should have the opportunity to grow up dirty.

We had two dogs. Everybody had watchdogs. You had to have watchdogs. We had a German Shepherd that paroled the flat roof that bordered the next flat roof that bordered the next flat roof. You could walk through the town by jumping roofs. Downstairs in the open area was our American bird-dog, Blackie. About three feet tall, ten years of age, marvelous watchdog. Chained by her collar on a 20-foot chain that linked to another. I was out in that courtyard. I guess my mother, who was teaching all of us kids by correspondence, must have been busy with my brother and sister and I was alone, not doing anything and I was bored. It was a dull day. I remembered that as I looked at Blackie that a few weeks ago she had gotten accidentally loose and torn up the outside door and chased people left and right down the street. She had a real good bite that's why she was good watchdog and she could sink her teeth into a leg calf and cause some agony. It was fun to see people run from her. I thought this day could be interesting if Blackie could get loose. So I'm now struggling with temptation, looking around seeing if anybody's looking from the lattice woodwork windows. A few of them had glass but most of them had kind of a Chinese paper over them.

Finally what I did I knew I couldn't let Blackie loose by the collar because then she'd be too hard to catch. But if I crawled up to the dog box I was just tall enough that with my feet on the dog box, I could reach the chain with the latch and drop the latch and there would be 20 feet of chain behind her and somebody following her could step on the chain and stop her. So I got up there, looked around, dropped the chain and it hit the dog box with a bang. As soon as it hit Blackie was off through the doors, which I conveniently left open. The inner door, the outer door, out into the street, and people started running. You could hear the doors begins to slam as people getting out of her way. Right away of course I yelled, "Blackie's loose! Blackie's loose!" My brother came out of nowhere. He was probably selling pigeons somewhere was part of the family deal. My dad materializes out of his study. The three of us run out of the missionary compound, out into the street. Dad's in the center. I'm on one side. Paul's on the other side. And we are running after Blackie who is cutting a zig zag path from door to door down the street. We're running a straight line so we're gaining ground. I'm thinking to myself, "This is the greatest day I've ever lived. Life's no longer boring." It was fun to see Blackie run after people.

As we were just about to catch up to Blackie I remember my dad looking down at me and in between puffs, because he was out of shape, he says, "George, when you get home you're going to get the whipping of your life!" Two reactions went through me. One was, How did he know? There was no time for anybody to tell him. Dad would never tell me how he knew. I've come to the conclusion when I was a parent that he looked at my face. Any parent could look at an innocent kid's face and tell exactly what they did. Parents know it. Dad knew I was the guilty one. Then the second thought that went through me when dad said, You're going to get the whipping of your life, he was not kidding. A whipping meant a whipping. It was not a nice little love tap. Dad had a razor strap, these old fashioned kind that you sharpen a razor on. He believed in using that liberally. He'd be arrested for child abuse if he lived in Orange County. My brother was a regular guest of his place of punishment but I tried to stay away from that strap. I knew that was going to create a lot of pain and it was going to raise some red marks.

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No longer was the day fun. We were at Blackie by then and stepped on her chain and got her. Fortunately she hadn't bitten anyone. We started walking back and now the day is not dull, the day is not exciting, the day is awful. As we're just about back to the house my brother Paul whose five years older than me does the most splendid thing. He says to my dad, "Dad, George is not used to getting whipped like me. I see how scared he is. Let me take his place."

I've loved my brother since that day. I never locked him in a trunk and threw away the key after that.

Let me stop the story for a moment and talk about the theological consequences of this story as it unfolds. My brother has offered to be my substitute, to take my punishment. Let's face it: I needed to be punished. Because I had to learn that I just didn't go out everyday and let the dog loose. Somebody could be seriously hurt. And my parents and whole family could be kicked out of the country. I had to learn that you cannot do that. Dad simply couldn't ignore that and say, "We love you, son. Don't do it again." He was going to get serious about this. So I needed the punishment. And my brother volunteered to take my place. But if he had gotten up on the dog box with me and let the chain drop then he couldn't have been my substitute for Dad would have said to him, "Paul, you were up there with George and did this as well. You cannot take his punishment. You're going to take your own." The only way my brother could be a qualified substitute for me was if in that respect he was innocent then he could be my substitute.

Then my father must agree to let him be a substitute. If he lets him be the substitute my father is going to show that he is serious about what he says and about discipline. But he also is going to teach me because I will learn not to do that again by either being spanked myself with the razor strap or standing outside and listening to my brother's screams and saying, "I never want to do that again to my brother." So either case my conduct is going to get reformed.

Only one last step is left. That is if my brother's offer was agreeable to my father then it must also be agreeable to me. I must say to my dad, "It's ok with me Dad that Paul takes my punishment." That's all a part of substitute.

I want to suggest to you that that is the exact nature of what is happening at the cross. My father, that particular day was not in a theological mood. He blew his chance to give a marvelous object lesson of substitutionary atonement. He chose instead to punish me. So my brother never had the chance. But years later when I tried to understand what the atonement of Jesus Christ involved a substitutionary death on the cross, that incident in my life came back to me. That's why the sinlessness of Jesus Christ is so important. He could not bear the punishment of anyone if He has committed similar sin.

Probably in this room just about every sin the book has been committed. If Christ committed any single sin in that area He could not be our substitute for the punishment would need to be born by Him for His own sin. He can only be our substitute if He is without sin. Then the Father must accept the offer. That's why the gospels make it a point to remind us that three times Jesus ministry the voice said, "*This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*" Then I must accept the offer of the substitute. I must be willing to say, "Jesus. You have my permission to die for my sins so that I can be released from the penalty of my sins." For the penalty of my sin and your sin is death. Jesus is saying, "I'm willing to take that penalty, that spiritual death, that separation from God eternally, I'm willing to take that if you let Me. Will you let Me?"

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That's what the cross of Jesus Christ is all about. That's the Passover Plan. Jesus came to bear our sins in His body on the tree. He who knew no sin might carry our sin so that we might be declared righteous and acquitted and innocent and unpunished. Christ died for me. And He died for you. That's what the crucifixion means in our life. He took our place.

Our Lord, we thank You for taking our place for paying a price we could not pay, to cancel a debt You did not owe. We owed the debt. We did the deed. For we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. There's not a single one of us here that is exempt from that. We've all fallen. We've all failed. But You have never failed. You did not fall. Voluntarily, You went to the cross as a sacrifice, as a lamb to take in Your own body the penalty for our sin that we who are guilty might go free. And that You might take all of our sin into death with You and in death destroy sin and the power of the devil and rise again demonstrating to us Your strength over the sin which binds us and separates us from God. When we accept You we choose to die to sin and we identify with Your death and in dying with You we are raised to newness of life. We do not have to pay the punishment for our sin, Lord, that You paid. But hearing You suffer on the cross, hearing Your words, sobers us and makes us realize that You call us to live to the best of our ability a life that is pleasing to You. Give us the strength Lord to do that. Continue to forgive us when we failed. Thank You for dying for us. Thank You for giving us Calvary. Thank You for being the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And thank You for being Him who was dead but is now alive forever. Amen.