

Keeping the Heart in a Season of Persecution

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[0 : 00] Well, in God's providence last week, Pastor John presented a message from Mark 13 on religious persecution.

! And as I first saw him presenting that message, I'm thinking, oh, he's teaching on what I'm going to be teaching next Sunday. So it'll just be an extension of what he presented last Sunday morning and what I'm going to be doing this morning. And he said, persecution, one of the points he made, persecution for faith in Jesus Christ certainly is not something new.

And that takes us back to his message in Mark 13. And it's interesting, as he was sharing that, you could almost just picture what was going on there when the disciples were standing there before the temple, just amazed at the size of the massive stones and the wonderful buildings that were there. They were just taken up with that and really were impressed.

But then, as he saw them being so enthralled with what was before them, he saw the opportunity to let them know of the coming destruction of this temple that they were so impressed with that probably in their minds were thinking, this kind of building will stand forever. And Jesus letting them know of the coming destruction of that temple, but not just the destruction of the temple, but the coming persecution that they would experience. Let me read those verses again for you in Mark 13.

So he's encouraging them, but be on your guard, for they will be delivered after he talks about the temple being destroyed. He focuses now on the persecution that they would have to undergo. But be on your guard, for they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations, and when they bring you to trial and deliver you over. Do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father, his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. So it must have been quite a sobering thought to them when they heard this description of what was going to happen to them in the future and the temple. Here they were on this high at the time that they were there standing before the temple, and now they're hearing of this sobering description of what was ahead for them, but not just them only, but future followers of Jesus as well. Really right up into the present day, this past

[3 : 30] Wednesday night, another focus that really was helpful in preparing for the lesson this morning. Pastor John had a brief time of sharing some requests of individuals presently who are experiencing persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. He made reference to one couple in North Africa that we were praying for and just providing their initials because their names can't be given out.

But the husband was called into the police station prior to his coming, or as he was notified, it was mainly they told him it was just for a visa renewal. But once he got in there to the police station and they started questioning him about what he was doing there in the church, he realized this is not about visa. This is about the message of the gospel that we're proclaiming there. Completely caught off guard, understanding that that danger was always possible, but now he was really in the thick of it.

And this is in North Africa. And just praying and asking for wisdom, working out the problem there with his visa renewal. And then Pastor John mentioned the Christians in Nigeria.

Pastor Nick Kennecott, who started a seminary there in Nigeria, needing labors there, but some students that had attended were converted Muslims and their lives were being threatened.

And he mentioned some other statistics about that country of Nigeria that I didn't write down, but I got it off online. Nigeria is at the top of the list of countries where Christians have been killed.

[5 : 26] We're speaking of what's going on in Nigeria today. According to an April 2023 report by the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, at least 52,250 persecuted Christians have been killed in the past 14 years simply for the crime of being a Christian. And there's other herdsmen from other tribes that are killing Christians in order just to steal their land without any follow-up from the authorities for what they had done.

And then another individual that he mentioned, a Laotian pastor, was murdered July 23 in 2024. And he as well recognized the dangers that he was experiencing in proclaiming the gospel there in Laos.

And some additional information, according to his friends, he was closely monitored by the authorities, had been warned to stop his Christian activities. Government leaders in Laos view Christianity as a foreign religion and a tool to undermine the country's communist regime. Authorities sometimes arrest and detain Christians in attempts to control Christian activity. And Christians are commonly denied medical treatment as well as educational and social services. When churches or private property belonging to Christians are damaged or destroyed, authorities often refuse to investigate.

So just three examples of situations where Christians today are brothers and sisters in Christ are at that point that Jesus was talking about in Mark 13, having to stand before civil authority and being hated by many, lives threatened and lives taken as well.

So the imperative for us today to be on your guard certainly had to be taken seriously by the disciples, but by us as well. For them, as they viewed the temple, they were experiencing the good times, the glory of the temple. And the Son of God, Jesus, the promised deliverer, was there.

[7 : 59] How could anything get better? These are the good days that they were experiencing. But in light of what was ahead, the severe persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their proclamation of the gospel, they needed to be warned and encouraged to be on their guard.

They needed to take heed of themselves to make sure that they would be ready for what was ahead, that they didn't see coming. At the time, they were living in good times.

But they needed to be ready in the good times for the persecution that would come. And so that they wouldn't fall into this self-protective silence when the persecution would come.

And instead, continue to live in love for Christ and love for those around them, even their persecutors, so that they could continue to proclaim Christ and the gospel.

And from reading the book of Acts, we can give thanks that they did just that. They did guard themselves carefully, not only them, but others that they preached the gospel to and also believed. We read through the epistles, many of these epistles that we read.

[9 : 23] Somehow the writer is addressing, or in some ways, addressing the persecution that they're experiencing because of their faith in Jesus Christ, and yet they continued on.

And they persevered, many of them, as we read in Hebrews 11, even persevering unto death for their faith in Christ. And so the message of Christ and the gospel has been preserved and presented through the years by these faithful saints, these followers of Jesus Christ who did so in the face of great opposition.

and persecution. And so, here we have it today. You know, what we have to be able to read each day, each morning, whenever you take up the Bible to read it, we have it.

Because of these faithful saints who persevered in the face of great opposition, and even, many of them, their own deaths.

And so the gospel has continued on and on. And so, Flavel's question that we deal with this morning is, how can we be kept from falling away under the greatest sufferings for the gospel?

[10 : 37] Understanding we don't know, as Pastor John mentioned last week, when the end of all things will come, it may be many years ahead. So, what we do with the gospel now, in times of peace, in regard to guarding our hearts, proclaiming the gospel in times of peace, but then also, maybe in years to come, we as well, having to endure persecution, as the saints are in other parts of the world today, will those future saints be able to say, oh, I'm glad those saints in Bremen had their hearts guarded, and continued on and persevered in the face of much persecution and opposition, so that now we have the word of God as well.

Maybe your children. I'm saying that, thankful that mom and dad and grandma and grandpa continued on, and held the gospel dear unto themselves, even to the point of death.

So, how can we guard our hearts with all vigilance? What truths do we need to have firmly fixed in our hearts, our inner man, so that we can be those faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ, in these times of peace, but also when persecution comes?

And so, that's where I want to start, sharing some truths that we need to have, firmly settled and fixed in our hearts, truths about God, initially here, and then we'll go to some other general truths. But, the first one that Flavel includes in his book, is that God is in control. Have that firmly fixed and settled in your heart.

[12 : 22] He's not just in control in all the times of peace, but also in times of great trouble. And this is what he writes, Settle this great truth in your hearts, that no trouble comes upon the church, but by the permission of her God.

And he permits nothing that will not also bring much good, in the end, to his people. Saints throughout history had learned this lesson.

In the Old Testament, Joseph knew and experienced this truth. After so much evil that came upon him from his brothers, and not just his brothers, but also others, he said to his brothers, Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about, that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

So God is in control. Even in those times of great persecution, in Joseph's life, and the lives of others, he brings about the salvation of other people.

[13 : 34] Just one example comes to mind, of course, Stephen, martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ. Who was there standing here in his testimony? Saul, who eventually became Paul.

And then he learned that truth as well, that God is in control. He lived in the reality of God is in control and working through him, even in times of great suffering.

The difficult circumstances don't stop God's plans for the proclamation of the gospel and the salvation of sinners. In fact, new opportunities many times develop through the persecution and the opposition.

Quite possibly, that never would have developed without it. But when the believers in Philippi heard that Paul was in prison, they were concerned for him and the ongoing ministry of the gospel through him.

And so to reassure him, this is what he wrote, I want you to know, brothers, see, they were not having this knowledge and understanding. They were missing something that was going on in and through his life in these difficult circumstances.

[14 : 44] And he didn't want them fretting and being anxious and coming to the wrong conclusion about what's happening in and through his life in this time of persecution.

So he writes, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. So you see, the conclusions that they were coming to were not accurate. And so he's writing to them, listen, brothers, I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, maybe very opposite of what you're thinking here.

So that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And at the end of the letter of Philippians in verse 22, chapter 4, he says, All the saints greet you, especially those in Caesar's household.

What a great way to end that letter. Starting the letter with that reality, this is what's going on. You know, I'm having extended opportunities to present the gospel because I am here in prison.

[15 : 58] And really, I was put in here by Caesar and the authorities to keep the gospel from spreading. Well, now it's come to his very household. How ironic was that?

God is in control. He is able to expand his kingdom through the preaching of the gospel, whatever the circumstances are.

settle this truth in our hearts so that we can be submissive servants of God, whatever the circumstances are, in times of peace that we're experiencing now, but quite possibly also in times of persecution that are to come.

God is in control. But then also, God is with us. It seems as though this is the truth that God's people question in those times of great difficulty.

God, where are you? You know, thinking that he has left us. Of course, he's not with us or this wouldn't be happening, but that's not the case.

[17:06] We do see this kind of thinking in the Psalms of Lament. Psalm 10.1. The psalmist says, Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Hey, we can understand that. Trials, suffering, is difficult. Challenges us in our inner man, our thoughts, our feelings.

Yeah, he was struggling with that as well. And so, we must be on guard of what untrue thoughts come to mind and that we aren't interpreting who God is based on our feelings.

And the reality for the psalmist was that God really had not left him. And this is what he writes later on in that same chapter in verse 17. He says, O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted.

You will strengthen their heart. So you see, both extremes of what he was experiencing that those human struggles within in a time of great suffering and difficulty, why aren't you here, God?

[18:19] Why do you stand so far away and yet the Lord does hear the desire of the afflicted? Of course, he knew that within his heart or else he wouldn't have been crying out to God.

So he had that settled conviction in his heart that truly God is there. Just struggling at the time but needing to come back to the reality of that truth that was far truer than what he was feeling or thinking at the time.

And Paul experienced comfort from having this truth fixed in his heart too. 2 Timothy 4, 16 and 17. At my first defense, no one came to stand by me but all deserted me.

May it not be charged against them but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The lion may be being Nero at the time or may be literal lions that he would have to face in the amphitheater that other Christians had to face as well.

[19:32] But that reality for Paul is what strengthened him so that he could continue on with his message in the face of great difficulties, as Flavel writes, It's true that the church's enemies are many and they are mighty.

Yet that argument that Caleb and Joshua used to raise their own hearts is just as effective now as it was then. The Lord is with us.

Do not fear them. We can give thanks that Joshua and Caleb and the Apostle Paul and others have been great examples to us of the reality of how you move through times of suffering with that settled conviction.

God is in control and God has not deserted me. God is with me. Next, God keeps us secure in our union with Jesus Christ.

We're kept securely in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1, 13 and 14, In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory.

[20:50] What a reassurance that would be for the saints at that time. Listen, you know, I'm feeling pretty weak here. Am I going to make it? My faith seems weak. And Paul reassuring them and we can take that same reassurance.

Listen, we are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. And it's the promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance right up until the time that we acquire the possession of that.

Certainly, to the praise of his glory, we give thanks for that. We're kept by the power of God, not by our own power and strength. 1 Peter 1, 3 and 5, Peter writes to these saints experiencing great times of persecution in the initial stages of that with Nero coming to power and more and more persecution that was building.

And this is how Peter prepares these saints. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable.

Undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you. They were losing many things. And yet, they had a greater imperishable inheritance that is being kept in heaven for them who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

[22:26] Kept securely in Christ by the firm grip of Jesus and God the Father. John 10, I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. Over and over again, I was talking to someone this morning, better to let the Scripture speak than me speak.

over and over again, we see in the Scriptures these reassurances to God's people that you are secure with me as your God. Let that be firmly settled in your hearts.

One more. In Jude 24, Jude was writing to these saints to contend for the faith so you know they were facing some difficult times.

Did they have any reason for hope? He provided them this hope. Now to Him who was able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy.

[23 : 38] It will be a time of great joy when you're finished with the battle standing before Jesus Christ because He was faithful to bring that to pass.

Well, we are secure in our union with Jesus Christ and familiar verses to us that really show us nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

Romans 8, 35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution? Yeah, all these things that they were facing there at the time which they may have been struggling with thinking that I'm not going to make it and I'm not going to be able to stand for persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword even as it is written for your sake we are being killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us for I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So the love of Jesus Christ for His people does not change. It doesn't waver. It doesn't fluctuate. It is always constant in the face of persecution when it comes and people threaten our lives thinking that that will certainly separate us from this God that you proclaim.

[25 : 20] We draw this truth back to our minds. The Spirit of God brings this truth back to our minds that we have previously settled within our hearts and reminds us no, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Next truth about God. God's mercies are always with us. In times of great suffering and persecution we might tend to be overcome with sorrow at the loss of temporal blessings that God has allowed us to enjoy.

Yeah, I'm not going to say oh, you shouldn't have all these things that we're enjoying now. No. God gives us all things that we can richly enjoy while we're here. We're not going to worship them and make them priority but we're going to enjoy them in the rightful way and rightful place but when time of persecution comes and we're threatened with the loss of these things we have to be careful that those things aren't tied in our hearts so tightly that we're not willing to give them up and let them go because we still enjoy great eternal blessings that are far greater than any temporal blessing that we could enjoy in this world.

I didn't write all the verses down with these but Colossians 1.14 The forgiveness of sins we have that can't be taken away. The great promises that are given to us 2 Peter 1.3-4 Our union with Jesus Christ Romans 12.5 Peace with God Eternal life with Jesus our Lord in a new heaven and a new earth and you could list many more of these mercies that we have.

Clavel writes in his book and asks this question How can we who are entitled to such mercies as these droop under any temporary affliction?

[27 : 17] I could probably say yeah I could probably still droop but if I keep my mind focused on what's been settled in my heart previously of the great mercies of God I'm not tempted with this loss of temporary pleasures possessions whatever it might be because I know the riches I have in Christ Jesus are eternally preserved in mine through my union with Jesus Christ so we need to be on our guard we need to be guarding our hearts with all diligence you could be sharing many more truths about God let me move on to some other truths that we can fix in our hearts that would help us in this time of great suffering and persecution first one our purpose and mission is constant whatever the conditions are our purpose certainly is to glorify God remember first Peter letter written to saints that are suffering great persecution what I like about the book of first Peter

Peter doesn't draw back he's compassionate he's understanding but he gives them truths they need to hear and to help them be strong and he says in first Peter 4 1 since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh arm yourselves with the same way of thinking and what was the thinking of Christ well we can follow it through the scriptures he was committed to the will of the father I mean that was his food that was his meat that was his heart's longing it came to the end of his life I've finished the work that you've given me to do because of that commitment that he had it was fixed in his heart

and he was set to move forward in the greatest time of suffering ever and he endured the cross despising the shame well he lived to do the will of the father in their time of suffering these saints they also needed to live and have that truth fixed in their hearts as we do today and so he continues on in 1st

Peter 4 and writes as each has received the gift use it to serve one another this is that having that same mind of Christ was fixed in his mind to do the will of the father and Peter told them you know have this same the mind of Christ fixed in your heart and as a result as he served now he encourages them as each has received the gift use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's very grace whoever speaks as one who speaks oracles of God whoever serves as one who serves by the strength that God supplies in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ to him belong glory and dominion forever and ever amen so once again pointing them back you need to continue to do continue to think with the mind of Christ you need to continue to serve as Christ served in his greatest times of trial and suffering and so you do the same and do it for the glory of God do it for Christ to him belongs the glory both now and forever amen have that fixed in your heart our purpose does not change the glory of God takes preeminent not the preservation of my reputation or my possessions priority is the glory of Christ in all situations next stick to our our mission our mission is to make disciples

Matthew 28 all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you and behold I am with you always to the end of age Jesus didn't say make disciples as long as it's convenient as long as people are willing to accept that mission just you know if the time a person comes just step back for a little time and just so that you don't get hurt or anything like that no the mission stays the same whatever the methods might change in which you're trying to carry out that mission but the mission stays the same so that mission is what we're committed to now in our quarterly meetings as men that's what our focus is trying to keep us on track have this mission firmly fixed in our hearts well it's a time of peace and we can be doing that how are we doing that how can we encourage each other to do that because when the time of persecution comes it's going to have to be firmly fixed in our hearts so we don't draw back and accept and take on some other mission my mission is just self-protection right now I don't want to lose what I have here no mission stays the same purpose and mission stays the same and by God's grace that was is what was nurtured in Paul's heart listen how this comes through him in Acts 20 18 through 24 he was with the elders of the church in Ephesus and he said to them you yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia serving the Lord with all humility and with all tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and now behold I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the

[33 : 33] Spirit not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me but I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself if only I may finish my course in the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel and the grace of God wow what a motivational speaker huh I mean he was doing that with his life understanding what was ahead and yet I don't count my life as anything dear unto myself but that I might finish the race that I had before me he had that settled conviction in his heart this is the mission that I have and I'm going to carry it out by the grace of God same mission that we have brothers and sisters of Christ as we start our day in times of peace I have a settled conviction that whoever to proclaim the gospel and how

I live and what I speak and as I make opportunity to do that let's keep going they also had to understand that they shouldn't be surprised when opposition and persecution come again Jesus warned his disciples he's preparing his disciples in that time of peace for future persecution they needed to be ready and he told them the various ways that would come in the religious circles in verse 9 of that chapter in the synagogues they would be beaten in civic circles they would be delivered to governors and kings in family circles brother will deliver a brother to death fathers their children and children their parents in all circles you will be hated!

by all hey you'd like to take on yeah probably not but by the grace of God seeing Christ for who he is and the gospel for what it is him changing our hearts so that we welcome Christ into our hearts

well indeed as Peter was among those disciples he did indeed experience what Jesus was helping them see what was ahead and he therefore passed on similar warnings to the people he was writing to in 1 Peter 4:12 he said beloved don't be surprised Jesus be on your guard disciples don't be surprised for what's coming ahead Peter learned that lesson now telling these things beloved don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice insofar as you share the sufferings of Christ or Christ suffering that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed so how are we preparing the next generation listen children you you love

Jesus but don't be surprised don't be surprised not all will love you in the message that you pray proclaim are we preparing our children who profess faith in Jesus Christ for what is ahead so that they can have these truths firmly fixed within their hearts and not be surprised when they are rejected by some who were their former friends because of their faith in Jesus Christ well another truth suffering is granted to us by God granted to us to suffer for our for or on account of our faith in Jesus Christ we don't usually think of this I remember when I first read this verse!

it kind of struck me hard and it said for it's been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake wow I want to give you this gift let me give you this gift of suffering oh thank you it takes a different mindset for us to have these truths of God and Christ and the gospel and eternal riches firmly fixed in our hearts if we're going to be willing to accept that gift that comes with accepting Christ it's our privilege to share in the sufferings of Christ this is what Paul said in Philippians 3:10 he counts he's already said he counts everything as loss that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death boy that's the truth again it's got to be firmly fixed in our hearts that this is something that's been granted to me by

[38 : 38] God this is something that my Lord my Savior my Jesus went for me shall I not go through the same for him for his sake Paul saw it as a great privilege and the other disciples as well they were beaten and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus and it says in Acts 5 then they left the presence of the council rejoicing that rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name and every day in the temple and from house to house they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus suffering is granted to us by God it also is granted to test our faith in Christ 1 Peter 4:12 beloved don't be surprised at the fiery!

trial when it comes upon you to test you 1 Peter 1:6 and 7 in this you rejoice so now for a little while it seems like forever but it is really a little while if necessary you have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith more precious than gold that perishes or anything else you might lose though it is tested by fire may be found to result in glory and praise and glory and honor the revelation of Jesus Christ Flavel writes if you estimate the happiness of the church by prosperity then such times will seem bad for her but if you reckon its glory to consist in its humility faith patience heavenly mindedness no condition is the world is more invitation for as for the church as an afflicted condition let me finish up here another truth to focus on we possess eternal riches that surpass temporal enjoyment and let me just get to the verses here

Paul writes I consider that the suffering of this present time is not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us I mean that's again a truth that has to be firmly settled in your heart listen I'm losing a lot here because of my faith in Christ but I've not lost greater treasures!

they can't be compared 2 Corinthians 4:16 we don't lose heart though our outer self is wasting away our inner self is being renewed day by day for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal how are you communicating this kind of truth to your children who constantly see the glories!

and the riches and the wonders in this world hopefully as parents and grandparents we're communicating our children yeah things these are pretty impressive but let me share with you greater treasures that I have in my faith in Jesus Christ well the last one that we can be encouraged by is Christ's church will prevail Flavel writes although the Christian church has lived in affliction for the past 1600 years yet she is not consumed many waves of persecution have gone over her and yet she is not drowned there have been many designs to ruin her and to this point none have succeeded and so we with confidence can also move forward quite possibly through times of persecution and when the church the existence of the very church of Jesus Christ that he said I will

build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against us we too can be encouraged we will prevail great God in heaven we do give thanks we would not have such a hope without you without [43 : 01] Jesus our Lord and Savior without this precious gospel being preserved that we might hear from some faithful saint who brought it to us now we pray that these same truths we would fix in our hearts these loves for Christ would be firmly settled in our hearts so that in times of peace like we're having now or when persecution comes we will remain steadfast and faithful to you and finish the race that you have set before us to your glory and the welfare of many in Jesus name Amen