

Exodus

Sermon #2: Providential Irony

Exodus 2

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- August 25, 2024

Hey, do you want me to tell you an amazing story? I want to tell you an amazing story, one that will change the way you view the life around you now, your past, and hopefully your future. It is a wonder-filled story, and we're going to see some things about how God works in ways that maybe you didn't know. But it's a story. Know this: there is fear and power, and there are heroes and villains and kings and jesters, there is tension and a lot of humor. You have to know what you're looking for.

The story is about how God rules His creation. It's the story about God Almighty and how He demonstrates what I'm calling "quiet power."

Now we're studying the book—actually, the epic—of Exodus together, and if you want to go there, it's the second book in your Bibles. We'll be looking at chapter 2. And you probably know the story of Exodus, the special effects story of Exodus. It's famous for the parting of the seas, and plagues, and all sorts of miracles.

But we're looking at chapters 1 and 2 today. And those two chapters are perfect for our time. Because it's in those two chapters that God is working like He is now—quietly—quiet power. And it makes sense to us today, when it seems like evil has run amok, just like back then.

Review on How to Read the Text

Now to review from last week, when we read Old Testament narratives, we need to know and understand that we need to be reading on two different levels. The story that the author, the narrator, is going to tell is the story plotline. That's on the first level. That's just what's happening. And it's mostly how it's making people feel. What's the overall mood?

And the second story is about what God is doing in all of this. How is He working out the promises He's made, because He's the promise maker and the promise keeper.

Last week we also defined what a hero is in the Bible—what a saint is. And that's a person who is able to see with eyes of faith. They're trapped in the current first-level story, but

they choose to see what God is doing. And then, two, they choose to be courageous and play their part in that story.

First Level: What Is Happening

So, here we are—the story of the Exodus. It begins where Genesis leaves off, where seventy people from all the tribes of Israel end up in Egypt. And they're sent there because they want to be saved from the famine that was going around. And Joseph, one of the brothers, had saved millions of people because of God's intervention. That's the first verse.

And then it cuts to 350 years later. They're still in Egypt. And they have been fruitful, and man, have they multiplied! They have filled Egypt! There are millions of Hebrews in Egypt.

Exodus 1:8-10

Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. ⁹ “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. ¹⁰ Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

And then it says—mood change—a new Pharaoh is in town. And he's a bad sheriff. In verse 8 of the first chapter it says, “Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. ‘Look,’ he said to his people, ‘the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal with them shrewdly or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies. And if they fight against us they're going to leave our country as well.’”

Now this Pharaoh is no mere anti-Semite. He's particularly chosen by God and placed in Egypt for this very moment. He has surrendered his soul and will to Satan. He is an agent of evil personified. He loathes God and all He is. And this story of the Exodus is about power. It's about control, it's about who has the right to rule. *Whom shall we obey?* That's what the story is about.

And this Pharaoh says that these Hebrews are multiplying too much, and he comes up with three different ways to deal with it. The first one is that, it says, he ruthlessly oppresses

them. The life of a Hebrew in that time—their whole life—from the day they were born to the day you die—there’s a single word that describes it: bitter.

Exodus 1:12

But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel.

But in that bitterness, Pharaoh’s plan is thwarted, because the more he oppresses them, the more they multiply. Verse 12 says, “But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel.”

Exodus 1:15-16

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶“When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”

So, Pharaoh comes up with another plan and says, “We need to kill the boys, but we need to kill them quietly.” He tells the Hebrew midwives who were overseeing to kill the boys. “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ‘When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.’”

Exodus 1:17, 20-21

The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.

²⁰ So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own.

But it says that “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. And so, God was kind to these midwives and the people increase and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own.”

Exodus 1:22

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

Well, that didn’t work. So, he was killing them quietly; now he moves to part three where he’s killing them loudly. Pharaoh says this: “Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: ‘Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.’”

This is a paradigm shift in the personification of the great Nile River. In the desert, water-- and the Nile particularly--once known for being source of life, becomes an agent of death. In chapter one, the mood of the first-level story, the first-level reading, is despair, and more importantly, where is God in this? His name is barely mentioned.

Exodus 2:1-2

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. ² When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.

Chapter 2 breaks into that and interrupts this despair rather suddenly in kind of a classic way in storytelling—with the announcement of a birth of a child. Chapter 2: “Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine, beautiful child, she hid him for three months.”

There’s something special about this child. It uses the word “beautiful” to define more than appearance. It’s the idea that God has brought this child to them for a cause. I think they probably sensed something from God himself, a ping—you know, a voice that says something.

But he’s a boy. And his birth comes with a death warrant. So, Moses’ mother hides him for three months, and after three months she can’t do that anymore. So, she comes up with this strategic plan to obey the law and still keep her boy.

Exodus 2:3-4

But when she could hid him no longer, she got a papyrus ark for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

So, in verses 3 and 4, “But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus ark for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile River.” And then the mother has the sister stand at a distance to see what would happen.

What happened? One of the daughters of Pharaoh, one of the princesses, is going down to the Nile River and walking on the banks. They see that ark, she picks it up and opens it up and this little baby cries. She has pity on it, and it’s a beautiful baby. It’s a fine baby.

And then Moses' sister comes over. She planned it. She comes over and says, "Hey, looks like you found something there. Maybe I could find Hebrew woman to nurse this baby and help raise him in his early years."

And the princess says, "Yes, you should do that. Go find someone who will care for this baby. And I will pay her to do that."

Can you imagine this story? You might have been a victim of a version of this, but think about it. She finds this little baby on the banks of the Nile and she goes to her father, the Pharaoh. "Daddy, daddy, look what I found! Someone left it behind. Can I keep it? He's so cute. I promise I'll take care of him and do whatever I need to do. Who's your favorite princess?"

Oh, the great and almighty Pharaoh. *Might I keep this baby? What do I have to say?* And the Pharaoh says "Yes, sure. But you have to care of it. You have to make sure you're doing what you're supposed to do."

And she says, "Well, I've kind of figured that out too. I've hired someone. I'm going to need to borrow some money, Dad."

And it goes on, right? She's doing this with a human. So, the mother is getting paid to take care of Moses, for, some would say, four or maybe five years, the most influential years of his life.

Exodus 2:10

When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

And then verse 10 says, "When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, 'I drew him out of the water.'"

So, in summary, in the earliest days of Moses' life he is living at home at his own house and Pharaoh is paying them to raise him.

And then the next thirty-five years of his life he's a prince of Egypt. There's more. As an adult, he sees an Egyptian—here it is again—ruthlessly oppressing one of his people, it says. And it says he looks this way, and he looks that way, and then he murders the Egyptian and buries him in the sand.

Now the very next day he sees two Hebrews fighting. And he breaks them up and says, “Hey, what’s going on here? Same team!”

And one of them says this: “Who made you ruler and judge over us?” I bet we’re going to hear that again. “Who made you ruler and judge over us? Didn’t you kill the Egyptian and bury him in the sand?” And Moses realizes that everybody knows. And it’s true.

Exodus 2:15

When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.

Pharaoh knows—verse 15: “When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.” He’s sitting down by that well, and there’s a priest in Midian, and he has seven daughters. They’re all shepherds and they come to that well to water their sheep. And the bully male shepherds push them out of the way and scatter their sheep. And Moses sees this from a distance, comes over, and roughs up the place and lets those women water their sheep and helps them get water.

The girls, the seven daughters, get home early to the priest of Midian, and he says, “Why so soon?”

“Oh, we met this man. He was a beautiful man, and he took care of those bad shepherds for us, and that’s why we’re home early.”

The priest of Midian said, “I am the father of seven daughters, and you didn’t bring this guy home? Go get him—we’re having dinner in thirty.”

So, the last scene, many years later, is Moses, and now he’s married to one of the daughters of the priest. He’s sitting by that well and he’s the one tending the sheep. He has a son and he names him Gershom—“I am a foreigner in a foreign land.” Which means that every time he calls his son, he’s reminding himself that he’s a man without a nation. He’s essentially alone. And he’s done.

Exodus 2:23

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.

The comment is added, “Meanwhile, back in Egypt ...” “During that long period, the king of Egypt died.” The new Pharaoh is no better. “The Israelites groaned in their slavery ...”--- look how it’s repeated—“...and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.”

Summary of First-Level Story: Where Is God Now?

So, let me just summarize chapter 2 at that first-level reading, just the plot. It starts off with hope, the birth of this special and beautiful boy. And it ends hopeless. It ends in a similar way to chapter 1. Where is God now? What about that boy with all that potential? But he also was a proud and angry man, and he murdered someone. Now he’s just living in the shadow of Mount Sinai, watching tumbleweeds and watering sheep. Where’s God?

The last couple of verses indicate it’s just as bad---no, it’s worse than before. “They groaned in their slavery and cried out.” Let’s just say that round two goes to Pharaoh. If it ends here, it ends.

Second Level: What God Is Doing

But there’s another plotline, isn’t there? There’s this second story. There’s another way of seeing this passage of Scripture. And it’s this. How does God rule quietly? How does He express himself without being too vocal about it?

There are three clues to seeing how God rules quietly. The first one is the mention of Levi. And that means that there’s something going on here for a bigger purpose. The narrator intentionally leaves out a lot of critical details. You don’t know the names of Moses’ father or mother or sister. What you do know about Moses’ family is that his mother and father were both

Levites. And the Jewish reader is knowing that that is something more. This gifted boy is going to gift Israel with an eternal gift. He's going to bring a lifeline to the nation of Israel, and frankly, to all of creation: the priesthood. And he will be the great high priest, in that he brings the very law of God from heaven to earth to all of creation. He's a Levite. There's a much bigger story going on here for a bigger purpose.

The second clue that we have is the word "ark," oddly enough. And that means that it's part of a bigger story. The word "ark"—he could have used the word "boat," or some other version of a flotation device. But the writer uses the word "ark" intentionally because it's only used in one other place in the entire Bible, and it's the Noah story. The author is saying here, *Hey, these are related.* As a matter of fact, they look like they're running a parallel path.

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--- Paul Sailhammer

Let me give you a quote from Paul Sailhammer: "Such shaping of the narrative is clearly intended to show that a sovereign God is at work in Israel's history. The theological connection between these two events"—Noah and Moses—"is self-evident. (1) Both Noah and Moses are specifically selected to forego a tragic, watery fate; (2) both are placed on an "ark" and are carried to safety on the very body of water that brings destruction to everyone else; and (3) both are the vehicles through whom God "creates" a new people for His own purposes.

Water is a major theme or symbol in this book. It is life, death, judgment, and salvation.

He puts him in an ark. God is still happening. There's a bigger story here.

Oddly enough, the third one is a wife from outside the well. And some of you who have read the Book of Genesis probably have heard when I told you the story about him going to this well and then ending up with a wife. That happens in the Bible. Where do Old Testament saints get their wives? They go outside of Israel—that's the outside part—and then they hang out at a well. *How you doin'?*

Every major patriarch that's attached to the Abrahamic promise after Genesis 12 gets their special woman at a well: Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and now Moses. There is something else

going on here. The point is this: that God Almighty is still working in the midst of the first-level circumstances. He's just doing it quietly. Let Him work quietly.

I'm thrilled to be able to be here today. **I want to tell you three truths about God's quiet power.** And these three truths—if you enjoy them and look for them---will change your life. Do you want me to tell you these three? Somebody? Okay, here we go, all right. This is how God flexes His quiet power—three ways that God flexes His quiet power.

One is God's use of providential irony. (I invented that phrase. I know it's not pretty.) It's providential irony. Jehovah loves irony. Irony is like the magic dust that He uses to turn kings into jesters. It's how He mocks people of power. The story is about power, authority, dominion. It's about whom we should serve and obey. All of this irony is towards Pharaoh, because the more he tries to thwart God's purposes, the more they increase. Every time he tries to stop God from doing something, it multiplies. The irony here is that, the way that God makes fun of Pharaoh, the great and powerful Pharaoh, this agent of the devil himself, is without even lifting a finger.

He has Pharaoh take a giant pit and fill it with water, and then Pharaoh builds a plank for all the Hebrews to walk off and drown. And then when Pharaoh is out there checking the stability of the plank, he falls in the pit and drowns. And the whole time, God is saying, *Yeah. There you go.*

There's a word for that, and the word is "irony." Ladies and gentlemen, my brothers and sisters, this is God's favorite use of God's quiet power. The power of His irony—look what is happening in this story. How does Moses end up in an ark? Because Pharaoh made it a law to put baby boys in the Nile River. And his mom complies. Even the parents' plan was to get Moses as far away from the enemy Pharaoh as possible, and where does Moses end up? In the living room of Pharaoh. He dines with Pharaoh every night. And the very person that Pharaoh is supposed to fear, the person who is going to take Israel away from Egypt, is the very person he invites into his house. And he's not going to just invite him there; he's going to pay, he's going to educate him, he's going to teach him leadership skills. The savior of Israel grows up in the security of Pharaoh's palace.

And listen, we've got to understand this. I'm going to say it five different ways. It's not just in the safety of Pharaoh's wrath like the other Hebrews; but it's also in the safety of the

consequence of just being a Hebrew. He avoids the life of a suffering slave, the bitterness. Moses is saved from the bitterness of life.

Picture two different Moses characters. Here's a Moses who lives. He's not killed as a baby but he's still a Hebrew. Forty-year-old Moses is working nothing but the brickyard, skin and bones, sunburnt skin, maybe illiterate. That's just if he's lucky to live. We're not talking luck, we're talking about God's providential irony.

And so, over here we have Prince Moses. He is healthy and strong. He has experienced the single best education in the Middle East. He knows multiple languages. He's trained to be a great leader. Good heavens, the man has a manicure and a pedicure every year, paid for by Pharaoh.

So, let me just summarize this irony. If it were not for Pharaoh, Moses would not have been the leader he needed to be in order to lead the people out of Egypt. Let me say it another way. Moses becomes the leader that he must be, not in spite of Pharaoh, but thanks to Pharaoh. I don't know how you say it—it's like, *Thank you, Pharaoh, for all you've done to set Israel free. We couldn't have done it without you. See ya!* They should have said that on the way out of town.

Application

Here's the obvious application for the quiet power of God. It's pretty obvious, right? We need to be looking for a bigger purpose, a bigger story, that God's still working. And I love, love, love this irony, especially when it's used on bullies and powerful people. I beg you to start looking for this providential irony. He uses it throughout the Bible for sure. Even salvation is built on that. But just wait—wait and see what happens with these pompous political people or media or the neighbor down the street. Watch and wait.

And here's the bigger point: trust. Why all the anxiety? Watch them dig their hole and fill it up and build their gallows and the planks. You're not supposed to be worried about this sort of thing.

And here's why we do, and this is the caution of it. God is still working. There's a bigger purpose, a bigger plan. But He doesn't have to tell us, does He? No. And it doesn't have to be on our timeline, does it? No.

So, the anxiety and the anger that we have in a world gone crazy is quite often because we don't think God is working quietly. Or if He is, He didn't tell us how He was doing it, and it's not working fast enough. Those last two are sins. Let's not care too much about too much, and let God rule His universe ... quietly.

I've got two other truths about how God rules the universe quietly. Do you want to hear these? Here's a good one, because this one will change you. God loves to use underdogs—the underdogs, the weak, the outcast, the runts. He loves it—the poor and the marginal, those who have been kicked out of the club.

Robert Alter is a famous Jewish scholar. He says this about how God does this in his book that concentrates on Genesis. “God works with and for the wrong people. God works with and for the second son, not the firstborn, in cultures where the firstborn gets everything. He works with Abel, not Cain. He works with Isaac, not Ishmael. He works with Jacob, not Esau. And not only that, God works with the barren woman, the older woman, the unlovely or unloved woman. It's always Sarah, not Hagar. It's Leah, not Rachel.”

1 Corinthians: 1:27

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

It literally says this word for word in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians in the first chapter: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

Look at this story. Who are the weakest, lowliest people in chapters 1 and 2 at that time, in that culture? Women. And the lowest would be midwives. There's a reason many of the midwives were midwives; it's because they were barren. They didn't have children. So, now there are women—and in chapter one it's all Jewish women—who couldn't bear children. We don't know the name of this Pharaoh, this great and powerful Pharaoh. Nobody even knows which Pharaoh it is. But Shiphrah and Puah? Their names are carved in diamonds in the halls of heaven. The angels know their names. They feared God and they chose to be courageous.

And then you just turn the page and chapter 2 is hilarious, because throughout all of chapter 2 it's the women who are outmaneuvering Pharaoh and telling him the way it ought to be or causing God to do what He's planned to do.

If you haven't seen the musical *The King and I*, the virtue of that is that the king thinks he's all powerful. Meanwhile, the maid is telling him the way it is.

Let's count. So, we have the two midwives. In chapter 2, Moses' mother who says, *Fine, this is an evil rule and law. If I'm going to put my baby in the Nile River I'm going to do it my way.*

And then Moses' older sister goes over to the princess and says, *Huh, shall I find someone to take care of this little baby for you?*

Yeah, that's a good idea, Hebrew female child. You should tell us what we ought to do next.

Archaeologists have found videos of this event taking place. And she goes like this: *And I will pay you.* And the princess says, *And I will pay you.* That's how it happened. This little girl is telling the princess the way it ought to be.

Again, the other woman in this story is the princess herself. Pharaoh's daughter comes in and says, *Hey, how about you have the nemesis and the ruler of the other team come and be raised here?* What else is going on?

Application

The application is pretty obvious. Anybody, right? Has anybody here been called a nobody? Well, God wasn't listening. He doesn't buy it. Anybody here ever called themselves a nobody? Well, God isn't listening to that either. He's not buying it. He's looking for anyone and everyone who will fear Him, who will choose to be courageous. That's all He needs. That's whose names are in the hall of heaven—the outcasts, the losers, the not-so-bright. Just regular folks.

So, you could be a freshman in high school and encourage a senior. You could be just a regular kid strengthening your teachers. You could be in the bottom floor of the mail room and make an impact. God just loves to use the powerless. It's His favorite.

Here's the third principle I want you to know and look for and see all around us—a way that God uses His quiet power. There is providential irony and the use of the underdog. But hear this—He loves damaged goods. He loves those who have fallen. He loves convicts. He loves chiefs of all sinners.

Have you ever been to that back corner in HEB where they put the stuff on clearance? And you think, *Clearance? Those things are for the dumpster*. There are things like an open bottle of orange juice, some corn flakes that somebody taste tested. And it's just a rack of all that stuff. And every time I go back there, I think, *Who would buy this?* God Almighty would. Who could use these damaged goods? Jehovah. He does.

Moses the murderer: it was his pride, it was his anger. And it destroys his potential to help lead. And in all his education, in all his getting to cut to the first of the line, he never learned certain attributes and skills in order to be one of God's leaders for His people--things like humility, surrender, and how to be a shepherd. So, God uses the very sin of Moses to get him to a place where he would be helpless and alone and dependent upon God, where God could forge these attributes in him. Moses sows death, and God harvests life from him.

Application

And so, the application is pretty obvious here, right? If we just think about it, our sins are many, His mercy is more. Praise the Lord. God uses everything—our victories and our defeats, our obedience, and our moral failures. So, some of you need to hear this. Get up. It's time to get up. Get back in this game. You've made choices you can't unmake. You're living with the consequences. Now let's just see what the sovereign God Almighty can do with what you have left. He loves to use even the broken.

So, the story ends with Moses sitting on a rock by a well tending sheep. He's counting tumbleweeds. He's eighty years old. He's a man without a home. And he's living with a lifetime of regret. Why did I kill that Egyptian? Oh, that's right—because I could. So, here he is. He's kind of given up. He's wondering if God could ever use him. Maybe something will happen in chapter 3. God Almighty is not done yet. He has a bigger purpose, it's part of a bigger plan. He works quietly behind the scenes.

Another great commentary says, “The author’s point is clear enough: God is at work in these events to bring about His plan, and no one, not even the great power of the gentile nations, or even Moses’ sin, can stand in His way.”

There’s a bigger purpose and a bigger story. God is still working on this.

Jesus and Moses

If you keep reading in your Bibles, you get to the New Testament, and you realize that this story you’ve seen in Moses, you’re seeing again in Jesus. Moses is a kind of Jesus. They’re both born into a place of being a high priest—the high priest. They spend the first three months/years of their lives running for their lives because a crazy king in power is threatened by their existence. They both descend from greatness into humility. They are both exiled for the purpose of their preparation, so that they might become a shepherd, or the Good Shepherd. They are both rejected by their people. They both lead their people out of slavery, out of death. Moses’ very life is threatened by trying to lead people out of this bondage. Jesus’ life is taken. It’s through His death and His resurrection that He ultimately takes us out of bondage to the slavery of sin and the costs of sin.

It’s a story. He’s setting us up for a future story. These stories are here in chapters 1 and 2 of God working quietly, so that later on we’ll still know that God is working quietly in the life of Jesus. There will be special effects in Jesus’ life too. But how God works most of the time is with irony, using the underdogs, and with the failures.

So, today I was hoping to be able to explain this story to you in a way that maybe the author wanted to, so that you could see God in all your life around you, and that it would maybe change the way that you look at your past, experience your present, and dream about your future. God Almighty rules what He creates—sometimes loudly, but mostly quietly. And a hero sees that and chooses to live courageously to bring His kingdom to His creation. Let’s be a church just filled with those types of heroes.

I hope you enjoyed our story time. Let me pray.

Oh, dear God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, the Father who put all things together just by wishing it to be true, we celebrate Your power, Your authority. And we confess

that when we don't see it, we lose heart and sometimes become discourages. We confess that sin and ask for forgiveness and receive that forgiveness.

May Your Spirit help us see all the work around us, so that we might enjoy You and even the story itself as it unfolds around us. Help us stop caring too much about too much and start enjoying the way You show yourself in the underdogs and in the failures and in all the irony.

Lord Jesus, we are grateful for Your death and resurrection. Spirit, we are celebrating the power that You give us. Father, thank You for showing us Your plan. Let us glorify You by living courageously, according to Your will as a church. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.