



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Habakkuk 3

“Habakkuk, or God's Providence for the Fearful”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] We thank Thee Lord for the opportunity before us again to look into the Holy Scriptures. We thank Thee for the truths that are contained within them and that they point us away towards Thee revealing to us the sufficiency that thou art for all of our difficulties and trials and needs. And we pray again that thou will give us enlightenment. Enable us Lord to learn the things that will help us to understand Thee, to know Thee better, and to cope with the things that face us as individuals the better. We praise Thee for the Lord Jesus and for the redemption that is ours through him. And now we pray that Thy blessing may be upon us in this hour and in the hour that follows.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Returning tonight in our study to the last chapter of the brief prophecy of Habakkuk, and the subject for tonight is “Habakkuk, or God's Provision for the Fearful.” This chapter is unique in prophecy for two reasons. In the first place, it is unique because of its form. It is a poem that is characterized by a kind of reeling. That is, there is swift transition of thought throughout it. You'll notice that the first verse of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter reads, “A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth.” That word *shagab* in Hebrew means “to err” or “to stagger to and fro.” And, therefore, the prophet

is telling us right at the beginning that what he is writing here is a kind of ecstatic poem. In fact, some have called it rhapsodic. So we should not be surprised then to find the prophets thought moving very quickly from one idea to another. And then the second thing that is unique about this third chapter of the prophecy of Habakkuk is that it is a prayer.

Now, some insist that the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse alone is a prayer but most of the scholars who have studied this particular chapter do consider the whole chapter to be a prayer in rhythmic form. Although, it is probably true that the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse is the heart of the prayer content. If you could read this in the Hebrew text, I’m sure you would agree that we have some of the most sublime language in the Old Testament. It probably contains the most extensive and elaborate theophony in all of the Old Testament. For what Habakkuk gives us here is a kind of vision of God as he comes in judgment. In fact, it would take a composer of the stature of Beethoven to set it to music, someone has said and I think rightly so.

Now, remember, in our study of Habakkuk up to this point the prophet has had several problems which he has brought to the Lord in order to find the divine solution. He has said first of all that he found himself in the midst of violence, and he asks the Lord how long is it necessary for him to cry out for help and why did the Lord make him look upon such iniquity. And then he received the answer that the Lord was going to give him an answer in his own days. I am doing something in your days, you would not believe if you were told. And then he describes to Habakkuk the chastisement that God is going to bring upon the Judeans because of their disobedience.

Well that raises another question in the prophets mind, and so in the next section, beginning at the 12th verse of chapter 1, he asks the question how is it possible that a holy God should take such an unholy instrument as the Chaldeans and make the Chaldeans the discipliners of people that are nearly so unholy as the Chaldeans themselves? And he is so troubled by this that he says that he was going to stand at his

guard post and station himself on the rampart until saw what the Lord would answer in response to his request.

And then in the latter part of the 2nd chapter God gave Habakkuk the response and it is an unfolding of divine judgment. While there is chastisement implied upon Judea, there is particularly judgment upon the Babylonian kingdom. And he describes in a series of woes the overthrow of the Babylonian empire, five great woes from which, no doubt, the Lord Jesus, his father Joseph, and Mary learned the language of divine judgment.

Now, coming to the 3rd chapter the prophet makes a request, and I’m going to read now the first two verses in which we have this request of the prophet. We read a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet according to Shigionoth.

“Lord I have heard the report about thee and I fear. Oh Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years. In the midst of the year make it known and wrath remembers mercy.”

Now notice right at the beginning he says this is a prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, so I think we are to understand that this is not a private prayer that the prophet prayed by himself, but rather it’s a public prayer. It’s a prayer that was given him by God and was given to him under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and he recognized it as such and gives it to us as an inspired portion, a prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet. So the fact that he takes the term the prophet which marks out his office and uses it of himself here, lets us know that this is a kind of official prayer.

Now the prayer is for two things. It is for swift judgment first and then for mercy. Notice the statement that opens verse 2, “Lord I’ve heard the report about thee and I fear.” There is nothing wrong in a prophet fearing. I am afraid that a lot of times we think that if we are in fellowship with the Lord we would never fear. But it is a fact of the Old

Testament revelation and the New Testament revelation that not only did the prophets fear but the apostles also. And in the apostles own language several times he remarks upon the fact, the Apostle Paul I should say, in the Apostle Paul’s own language several times he remarks upon the fact that he found it necessary to fear.

Now the prayer of the prophet Habakkuk is “Revive thy work in the midst of the years.” Now we are inclined to think that this is a prayer that God would revive the hearts of the people, but that is really not the force of these words. The word *chayah* which is used here means to call to life, and so really what this is is a prayer for swift execution of judgment. And it is swift execution of judgment upon Judah and their chastisement and Babylon in the destructive judgment that the prophet wishes to see brought upon on them in the light of God’s word that that is what would be done. So when he says “Lord I have heard the report about thee and I fear, O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years.” In the midst of the years make it known he is calling for swift judgment in accordance with the promises just above.

Now, I think also when he says “In wrath remember mercy” that he is asking that in the midst of this revelation of judgment and in the pouring out of it that God would remember his compassion. I would imagine that what he is praying in something like so many of us pray when we find it seems to clear that a certain thing is the Lord’s will and we don’t really like it. We pray lord may thy will be done and get it over with as soon as possible. [Laughter]

Now, that seems to be the kind of thought that the prophet here is suggesting when he says, “Call to life thy work in the midst of the years.” If you’re going to execute judgment go ahead and execute judgment and discipline and accomplish thy purposes. Luther, in a preface to the small call articles, has a little phrase “Deliver thy servant by glorious advent,” and I think that’s something of what he is saying here. In wrath remember mercy. That’s a most interesting expression. Habakkuk doesn’t say O Lord I do see that this punishment was necessary but I want to remind you that we tried to be

good. He doesn’t say there have been worse times in our history than the present and you didn’t treat us so bad then so why are you going to have to do this now? What he really says is just remember the other side of yourself when you’re executing your judgment “In wrath remember mercy.” Act yourself he’s praying and of course it’s a tremendous expression of faith in the nature of God. He recognizes that God is going to judge because of the evil the Judeans and because of the wickedness of the Chaldeans but he also knows that there is another side to God and that the other side of God is his goodness, his mercy, his compassion. That’s the force of the word here compassion rather than loving kindness but the same thing is true “in wrath remember mercy.” So remember yourself, Lord, as you execute your judgment.

Now with verse 3 we come to the revelation that came to the prophet. Evidently, as he as praying this revelation came to him and he describes a visible manifestation of God in the splendor of God’s might. One of the students of the minor prophets whose books on the Minor Prophets have been read by more than almost anyone else, I imagine, George Adam Smith, for his books have been extremely popular. George Adam Smith called this the great theophany, and there is an element of truth to that because this is probably the greatest picture of the appearance of God that we have in the Bible. It pictures the future redemption under imagery drawn from the past. And so the prophet under the inspiration of this Spirit thinks about the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt. He thinks about the deliverance when God led them through the Red Sea. He thinks about the manifestation of God on Mount Sinai when the law was given and he also brings in and usefully uses phrases and clauses that suggest that deliverances that God gave the people of Israel in the land of Canaan.

He begins by saying in verse three, “God from Teman, the holy one from Mount Paran.” Now these two places were in the south, and so the picture is of God appearing from the south “The holy one from Mount Paran, his splendor covers the heavens and the earth is full of his praise.”

Now when he says God came from Teman he just pictures God as riding out of the south as a kind of conquering warrior, and he describes the splendor of God as covering the heavens and the earth as full of his praise. Notice I should have commented on the Selah right after verse three. Selah is an expression about which we do not know a great deal. It probably or it may mean either to intensify when it was being sung to music or to play an interlude suggesting perhaps a pause as in order that those who are listening to the prophecy may have an opportunity to meditate upon it. You have noticed many Selah in the psalms and I think that this is the only place outside of the psalms in which we have it but a couple of times in this chapter we do have Selah.

I have a good friend who is a Bible teacher and he said that Selah is what David said when he broke a string on his harp, but I don’t really think that would stand up to scholarly investigation. In the 4<sup>th</sup> verse we read “His radiance is like the sunlight, he has rays flashing from his hand, and there is the hiding of his power. Now here is a beautiful expression of the radiance of God. Notice that expression in verse 4 “His radiance is like the sunlight, he has rays flashing from his hand, and there is the hiding of his power.” The point that the prophet is making here is that God is a holy God and the way to describe it is to describe it under the terms of brightness or radiance suggestive of the power and great glory with which the Lord comes in his second Advent or suggestive of the amount of transfiguration when he was transfigured before the apostles and they saw the brightness of his face, or perhaps the expression in Hebrews chapter 1 in verse 3 when the writer of that epistle describes the Lord Jesus as the radiance of the glory of God, the exact representation of his nature. So the prophet is using these marvelous expressions of God which point him out to us as light.

Now that is one of the great features of the word of God that God is pictured under the semblance of light. Over in 1 Timothy chapter 6 in verse 16 around there, we have other expressions of God as a “God who dwells in light, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light whom no man has seen or can see to him

be honor and total dominion.” The purpose of all these expressions is to stress the holiness of God and surely that is something that we ought to be stressing today and also ought to be remembering as Christian believers, our God is a holy God. When we sing such hymns as, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts” we’re singing something of the nature of a God who hates sin.

I don’t think there is anything that we need more of today than a re-studying of the holiness of God in our own personal Christian lives. The brightness of his glory, his radiance is like the sunlight. In one of the commentaries that I read on Habakkuk someone told the story of a missionary who was trying to explain what brightness was to some blind people. And he was casting around for a way to do it and first of all he suggested that some, or one of the blind men made a suggestion, well he thought that probably brightness was like lightning but then it turned out that he was not a man that was born blind and he remembered the lighting and the brightness and there were several others who had been born blind who of course did not have any understanding whatsoever of what lightening was. So finally someone suggested well perhaps brightness may be likened to the warmth that we feel from the sun as over against the coolness that we feel when the moon is out and since blind people could understand that that helped a little bit.

But finally the missionary hit upon an explanation that he thought might be of some help. And he said brightness is like the light that shines in upon on when we realize that the Lord Jesus Christ is our Savior and we have beheld in Him the brightness of the glory of God and saving power. Then the missionary said he wasn’t sure whether all of the truth had gotten over or not but he could tell by the smile on their faces he had at least helped them. Radiance is like the sunlight. He has radiance flashing from his hands and there in the brightness is the hiding of his power. Incidentally, you will notice that there is a connection here between the holiness of God and the power of God. And when he says “And there is the hiding of his power” what he means by that is the behind

the brightness and behind the glory of the brightness is the express implication of his almighty power.

Now, then he describes what happens and in these verses that follow he discuss the purpose and the effects, I think I put it there, of the theophany. Verse 5 “Before him goes pestilence” this recalls the ten plagues of Egypt, and plague comes after him, “he stood and surveyed the earth, he looked and startled the nations. Yes the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed, his ways are everlasting.” I like that picture that is given us in the sixth verse “he stood and surveyed the earth.” It’s the picture of a God who stands in preparation of judgment and the picture is of a giant striding across the earth. And as strides across the earth he startles the nations, the mountains are shattered, the hills collapse, and the text concludes in verse six “His ways are everlasting.”

Now, that incidentally may be translated his goings were as a whole. In other words, he will act in the future as he has done in the past. He is faithful. If he has done something for Israel in the past he can be counted upon to do that for Israel in the future, his goings were as of old. Then in the next verses beginning with the 7<sup>th</sup> verse he continues “I saw the tents of Cushan under distress.” Cushan is probably Ethiopia and so since this is west of the Red Sea, he is speaking about the west here “The tent curtains of the land of Median, since that’s east. he is talking about the east. And so he speaks about a kind of worldwide trembling that takes place as a result of the theophany of this great God. “Did the Lord rage against the rivers, or was Thine anger against the rivers or was thy wrath against the sea that thou did stride on thy horses on thy chariots of salvation?” The purpose of the power over the elements was the salvation of his people and so he was not simply raging against the rivers, he wasn’t mad at the streams, his wrath was not against the sea but he was using these things in order to express his wrath against individuals and deliver his people in his mighty salvation.



Let me read on a few more verses, “The mountain saw thee and quaked the downpour of water swept by, the deep uttered forth its voice, it lifted high its hands, the sun and moon stood in their places.” Here is figure drawn from the incidents from the book of Joshua, “Sun and moon stood in their places, they went away at the light of thine arrows at the radiance of thy gleaming spear. In indignation thou didst march through the earth, in anger thou didst trample the nations, thou didst go forth for the salvation of they people, for the salvation of thine anointed. Thou didst strike the head of the house of evil to lay him open from thigh to neck.” That’s a very interesting text that 13th verse ‘Thou didst go forth for the salvation of thy people.’ It’s evident that this 3rd chapter that Habakkuk has written is not only a picture of the coming destruction of the Babylonian Empire, the Chaldean Kingdom, but it also is typical of the final destruction which shall take place at the Second Advent to introduce the kingdom of our Lord Jesus upon the earth. And so what we have here then it not only a picture of that in the immediate future of Habakkuk, but also that which adumbrates what is future from our standpoint. “Thou didst go forth for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of Thine anointed.”

And in the Hebrew text the second line of verse 13 is very interesting because it reads something like this “For salvation with Thine anointed” not strictly speaking of Thine anointed. The form that is used here is *mashiyach*. And the form in which the prophet has written this suggests that there may be even a reference to *mashiyach* or the messiah himself, for salvation with Thine anointed one, in other words, a reference to the work that the Lord Jesus would accomplish in his Second Advent.

And then in the next line when we read, “Thou didst strike the head of the house of evil,” and the form that is used in the Hebrew text here of *machats ro’sh* is the precise form that is used in Psalm 110 in the Messianic Psalm, descriptive of the judgment the Lord Jesus would exercise on the kingdom of the beast at the Second Advent. And so we can see that even in these Old Testament prophecies which speak of the immediate future, they go far beyond that on to the introduction of the kingdom of God upon the

earth. And the head of the house of evil is ultimately the beast itself. I suggest that you look at Psalm 110, verse 6, verse 7 in the light of this. And you will notice even the language of smiting, *machats*, is an expression that is used in that particular Psalm. Now that is not for you who are just ordinary people -- that’s for those who have their Hebrew text.

Now in verse 13 we read, “Thou hast pierced with his own spears the head of his thrones they stormed in to scatter us their exultation was like those who devour the oppressed in secret. Thou didst tread it on the sea with thy horses on the surge of many waters.” Here in the 15th verse, now the prophet has reached the climax of his description of the theophany, the nature and effects, what we have seen is something as mighty as seeing and hearing the thrash and collapse of the Rocky mountains and the onset of tidal waves that engulf all of the land and sea and overthrow everything that might be physically thought to obstruct. It is a great picture of God the great warrior who exercises judgment.

Well the response of the prophet follows in verse 16. And first of all, we notice his trembling. “I heard and my inward parts trembled at the sound my lips quivered decay enters my bones and in my place I tremble because I must wait quietly for the day of distress for the people to arise who will invade us.” Now, notice that his trembling is not from lack of faith, but his trembling is from weakness in his faith, There is a great deal of difference between trembling because we have no faith and trembling because we are weak in the midst of faith. And the prophet’s faith had not failed him, but he simply trembled because he was not as strong as he might have wished to be.

Now he goes on to speak of what he himself trusts in and we notice in this the triumph that the prophet in the midst of this magnificent picture of judgment “He says though the fig tree should not blossom and though there be no fruit on the vines though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce not food,” incidentally, these were the types of things that happened when conquering nations came into the land of

Palestine, “And the fields produced no food though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exalt in the Lord.”

Again in the Hebrew text there is a great deal of stress upon that we have [Hebrew indistinct] or as for me I will exalt in the Lord I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength and he has made my feet like hinds feet,” the reference to hinds is the reference to deer, of course, that suggests energy or sure footedness, “and he makes walk on my high places.” So what the prophet says is amid the disaster that is to come I am rejoicing because I am rejoicing in the God of my salvation the Lord God of my strength he will make my feet like hinds feet, he will make me walk on the high places, the high places is reference to the land of Palestine.

Now, the point of this, of course, is as he has said in chapter 2, verse 4, “The just shall live by faithful reliance upon God.” And the prophet himself is the first illustration of the truthfulness of the great text which we remember so much in the prophet Habakkuk.

Now, I want to conclude our study by suggesting two or three lessons that have emerged from this 3rd chapter of the prophecy of Habakkuk. There is, first of all, I think, the lesson of submission and humiliation before God. Notice now again Chapter 3, verse 2 “Lord I have heard the report about thee and I fear in wrath remember mercy.” He has risen now above intellectual perplexity. He began this prophesy by speaking of the confusion that he felt because he did not really understand what was happening. But now he is risen above intellectual perplexity and his relationship with the Lord is direct. He stopped making comparisons between the Judeans and the Chaldeans because that leads to the neglect to our own sins. In other words, he is not thinking so much now about how we are bad alright but nearly so bad as the Chaldeans. Incidentally, that’s why it is always an error for a local church to make the chief job of the church the combating of Communism.

Now almost all of us in this room, I presume all of us in this room, would not be happy to have Communism as the government of the United States or the principles of socialism and communism in this country. But there is something more important than even the important task of fighting a form of government which is contrary to the Biblical revelation. It’s very easy for us in the midst of the work of the Lord to substitute for the first thing a good secondary thing. And I think we see right here in the prophet in Habakkuk an evidence of the fact now he’s no longer making comparisons between Judea and the Chaldeans. It’s not we are better than they but he’s thinking now about his own relationship to the Lord and also to the failings and shortcomings of Judea themselves. And the individual application is, are we what we ought to be? In other words, it’s not so much that we are a little better than some others who are very bad, but are we what we ought to be? And so when he says “In wrath remember mercy,” well he’s just expressing to the Lord the fact the he knows that he needs compassion from God. So in your wrath remember the other side of your nature, not questioning the fact that God ought to judge them now, but he’s asking that God in the midst of his judgment may remember there is another side of his nature and this is his loving kindness, his faithfulness to his covenant and his compassion, his love, his goodness.

It seems to me that in our own personal lives that’s a good lesson to remember. To forget about how we may not quite so bad as sister so and so or brother such and such, just remember we ourselves in the sight of God deserve the chastisement and discipline that he sends us and we should try out for that other side of his nature in deliverance. I think the prophet had learned something and I think that is one reason he has given us this third chapter. He wants us to learn from his own experience that he has now has a different idea about what he should say when he approaches God.

Now, I think the second lesson that we have here is the lesson of God’s provision for the fearful and for the perplexed. Now, we are inclined to think, I think perhaps I am speaking only for myself, but we are inclined to think that these prophets and apostles

never did fear. But they did fear. They were people just like you and me, and consequently, they did have fears. I’m going to give you one passage so you will remember this one particularly. The Apostle Paul speaks of his own ministry in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 in verse 5 and he says, “Even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest but we were afflicted on every side, conflicts without, fears within.”

Imagine Paul fearful. Have you ever thought that the apostle could be fearful? I confess that when I looked at that I wondered how that was possible. This man who has expressed in such glowing terms trust in God and has called us so often to trust in the Lord, who has told us how the Lord was sufficient for him in all things, that he was confident that God was able to supply all of his needs, and that God keeps on strengthening his saints through all of his experiences. Paul fearful, yes, the same was true of Abraham. of David, David was not only fearful but he had a habit of running too. Jeremiah he was fearful, John the Baptist, all of these great men at one time or another, not to mention Elijah the worst example of all, fearful of a woman. No wait, I’d better take that back. He had good reason to fear. But, anyway, these great men of God fearful? Yes they were fearful, but in the midst of their fears Habakkuk says “Yet I will exalt in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”

So in the midst of the fears his faith held fast. And I think this is a lesson of God’s provision for the fearful and the perplexed. The experiences of life do bring great fear to us, but in the midst of it we have the confidence resting upon our Lord Jesus will not fail us. That’s what we mean, incidentally, when we say that we believe in the perseverance of the saints. We mean by that that they shall not apostatize in their faith and we, of course, mean that the saints will persevere because God will preserve them in their faith, the true saints and their faith shall hold fast because he holds us fast. Mr. Spurgeon used to like to say “I do not think that it’s best to call that doctrine the perseverance of the saints rather the perseverance of the Savior.” But the truths are just two sides of the same

coin. So God will preserve us in the midst of our fear, in the midst of our perplexity, and Habakkuk is a good illustration and example for us.

And finally, notice the illustration of the adequacy of God for the prophet. He doesn’t resign himself at the end, he doesn’t say well my relationship to the Lord is liked spilt milk, there is nothing I can do about it. He doesn’t say maybe I should try the principle of psychological detachment. Don’t think about it just not going to think about it. I’m going to worry my golf game and how my business is doing. Nor does he seek to strengthen himself by courage, I’ll not whimper. I’ll just buck up and bury it in my own strength. No the prophet in the final analysis exalts in the Lord and rejoices in the God of his salvation and then says the Lord God is my strength. It’s almost as if he were repeating what is later given us in the 19th chapter in the Book of Revelation, “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.”

In other words, the thing that encourages in the midst of the judgment that is to come and the fear and perplexity that gripped him as a human being, just as you and I are human beings, the thing that really sustained him was his sense of the fact that God was sovereign in the circumstances of life and would sustain his servants. He looked at the past, he looked at the way God had delivered Israel, and in the light of those great deliverances he had hope for the future. Just as you and I today, we have greater privileges than the prophet Habakkuk, of course. We are able, not only to look at the things that God did for Israel but we are able to look at the things that God has done for us. True he took Israel through the Red Sea in a mighty act of power, but he has for us brought our Lord Jesus Christ up from the grave on the third day manifesting in the mightiest show of divine power the power of resurrection. And both of these manifestations in the Old and in the New are simply evidences of the greatness of the power of God that is at our disposal, not only at our disposal but really works in our lives.

So we can think of the words that our Lord Jesus encourages us with, it is I, be not afraid, be of good cheer I have overcome the world. As the hymnists put it “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus name, when darkness seems to veil his face I rest on his unchanging grace, in every high and stormy gale my anchor holds within the veil, his oath, his covenant, and his blood.” I think the hymn writer must have meant the oath by which the Lord has sworn that would be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. “His covenant, the new covenant, by which he guarantees for believers, forgiveness of sins and blood that which he inaugurated that new covenant support me in the whelming flood when all around my soul gives way He then is all my hope and stay, on Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand.” I love that hymn.

So come what may we’ll do what Habakkuk did, I will rejoice, exalt in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation, and I will learn the lesson that Habakkuk learned that the just shall live by his faithfulness when joined to a God who is adequate for all things. What a great affirmation the prophet has given us here in this 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter. In the final analysis after all of the intellectual problems, after all of the problems of have been fought over in his mind, his faith rises above the problems of life and grasps God himself, and that really is the lesson of the prophet.

Let’s close our study with a prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for these wonderful lessons that come from the prophets, and we thank Thee for the greatness of the trust in Thee which is set forth within them. And we pray Lord that the trust that the prophet manifested in the midst of the fear and perplexity of the terrible judgment that soon to come may be our trust in the midst in the experiences of our own lives. We ask Lord that Thou wilt enable us to exalt in the God of our salvation. May, Lord, the strength that Thou does desire to give us be ours. We pray, Lord, that if there should be someone here who does not

know the Lord Jesus, we ask that Thou work in their hearts to the end that they too may flee to Him who is a refuge from divine judgment and from the experiences of life that would cast us down forever. May Thy blessing be upon the hour that follows.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.