

The Purpose and Power of Christian Ministry

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[0:00] All right, good morning again, everyone. Do turn with me to 2 Corinthians, chapter 4. And hopefully you found a bulletin maybe on your seat or the seat next to you.

! You'll find an outline of my talk there. You might have found a pen there as well. That's to help you if you want to take notes. And it's also to help you with the connection cards later on.

I've been, you know, diligently and reading your connection cards and delighted. It's really a joy and it's actually... I know it might seem like a small thing, but it's really helpful and really important to me that I hear from you.

About the things you're learning, the questions you have, feedback, prayer points, all sorts of things. So please make use of those, especially if you're not in the habit of doing that.

And the pen is there to help you. Okay, so we're up to 2 Corinthians, chapter 4. If you're new with us this morning, we're just working our way through the book of 2 Corinthians, one passage at a time.

[0:59] Trying to understand what God is saying to us there through the Apostle Paul. So this week we're up to verse 7, where Paul gives us just the most sort of striking image probably of the whole book, which our whole series is named after, this image about the jars of clay.

So let me read what the Apostle Paul writes here. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken.

Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, I believed and so I spoke, we also believe and so we also speak.

[2:18] Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

This is the word of the Lord. I want to begin with a question that's there on your outline. What does authentic gospel ministry feel like?

Catherine and I were chatting about this job, senior pastor job before I took it, and she said, I think, darling, what it'll mean, I don't remember if she used the word darling actually.

Anyway, I'm softening it. I think what it'll mean is dying a little bit more. I think she was channeling Keith and Marion virtually because I recall them saying something about their decision to go to, something similar about their decision to go to Papua New Guinea.

And I hadn't quite felt about it that way or been thinking about it in those terms. But actually, that's right. Isn't it? She was right on the money, my very godly and wonderful wife.

[3:38] So I don't know if that sounds a little bit morbid to you or pessimistic, but it's not about that. It's just biblical.

That's what Christian service is all about. Authentic gospel ministry is about death. Dying so that others might live.

Now, most importantly, of course, our paradigm for this is the cross of our Lord Jesus. Didn't we read last week in Isaiah chapter 53, by his wounds, we are healed.

Jesus died so that we might live. And as Jesus' disciples, we are to imitate him in this regard. In Mark chapter 10, whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Leadership is about sacrificial service, laying down your life so that others might live.

[4:49] In John chapter 13, when Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, do you understand what I've done to you? You call me teacher and Lord and you are right, for so I am.

If I then, your Lord and teacher, I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I've given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Christian discipleship is about service or ministry, that's all that ministry means.

Ministry sometimes makes it sound a little bit fancy, but it's just service, being a servant. Christian discipleship is about service, and Christian service is about death.

Laying down our lives in humble service of others so that they might live. And this is the paradigm that hangs over the whole book of 2 Corinthians.

[5:53] Paul sees himself as a servant of the servant. A servant of the Lord Jesus, who is the great comfort-bringing servant that Isaiah foretold in Isaiah 40 to 66.

So just as the greatest servant of all laid down his life in service of others, just as the servant had to be wounded so that others might be healed, so Paul sees the necessity of being wounded, even dying, in order that others might live through his ministry.

And as we've seen before, Paul keeps using these first-person plural pronouns, right? It's not just that he's an apostle, and he, you know, as an apostle, he had to endure suffering in order that others might live.

No, this is the precondition of all Christian discipleship and all Christian service everywhere. So it's how Paul and his team of co-workers operated, but it's also how the Corinthians and all of us need to operate.

All Christian service involves pain and hardship and suffering and death so that others might live. If you want to bring comfort and healing and life to others, the key is to embrace the path of weakness and death and suffering for yourself.

[7:22] Just to put it another way, where do you see the life-giving ministry of the suffering servant today? I mean, of course we look back at the cross, and we see the suffering servant there hanging on the cross to bring life for us, but where do we see the work, the life-giving work of the suffering servant today you see it's in the suffering servants of the servant.

It's in the pathetic, weak, battered, exhausted, slandered, and maligned, and mistreated, and spit upon lives of believers like you and me bringing life to others as we bear the marks of humble service in our own bodies and in our lives.

So as we dive into our passage this morning, Paul gives us a striking image to remember this by, this image of the jars of clay, treasure in jars of clay.

First, the treasure. This treasure refers back to the previous verse and the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In other words, the treasure is the inner illumination, the personal knowledge of God that comes through the gospel and now lives inside us and transforms us and overflows from us.

And that's what Paul is saying is the treasure. The knowledge of God that comes through the word of God, it's more precious than diamonds and pearls. Knowing God is a treasure to be cherished and delighted in and protected, which is a challenge to us sometimes, isn't it?

[9:11] It might be a challenge to you this morning or that glitters is not gold. Sometimes our eyes get distracted by other things, the fading treasures of this world.

Have you forgotten what is really valuable in the world, brothers and sisters? The first thing that this passage reminds us of is of the preciousness of knowing God. This thing that we've got inside of us that sometimes we take for granted is a treasure beyond comparison.

A life-giving, enlightening, transforming, renewing, and refreshing treasure. But notice Paul's big point in this verse is that God has a purpose in storing this treasure in jars of clay.

Now the ESV, which is the Bible translation we tend to use here, the ESV inserts, I think quite unhelpfully at this point, a verb to show.

Okay, if you've got it in front of you, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show. But actually in the Greek there's no verb for showing or displaying or manifesting or proving or anything like that in this

verse.

[10:26] So I think it's a really helpful, unhelpful insertion. I just want to clarify it if I can. Because God's purpose here is not just about showing where the power comes from.

It's not just about showing that the power comes from him and not from Paul. It's much more direct than that. It's about the reality of the thing. So the CSB, okay, this is another great translation out there.

The CSB gets it right and puts it like this. Now we have this treasure in clay jars so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.

Right? You see, I mean, that's what the Greek literally says. It's not about showing where the power comes from. It's actually about where the power does come from. In other words, there's a way to do ministry in your own strength with your own power.

You see. And there's a way to do ministry using the power of God. So again, think about, just to, you know, help clarify this maybe, think about verses like 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 17 where Paul says, For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

[11:55] Now, isn't that an arresting statement? Isn't it rather shocking? What could empty the cross of Christ of its power? I mean, you would think, or, you know, if you're anything like me, you would think, nothing could do that.

What could do that? And in a sense, that's true. You know, I still think that. God's plans and purposes to save people through His own Son's death were never going to fail.

Ultimately, you know, in one sense, the power of the cross cannot be thwarted or stopped because God is sovereign. But in another sense, in His sovereignty, God has determined that the power of the cross will only reach people through cross-shaped ministry.

Does that make sense? So the method and the message have to match or something like that. God didn't send His Son to save us by dying in weakness and shame and death only then to have the message preached by successful and powerful and sophisticated and wonderful-looking, you know, golden vase-type people, you know, in powerful and sophisticated ways.

You see how that would kind of, it wouldn't match what the message is about. So Paul's problem with the aggrandized, self-promoting, highly acclaimed, five-star rating speaker is that all their power is their own power.

[13:31] It's not God's power. It's not just that people won't be able to see where the power comes from. It's that the power won't actually be coming from God because God in His sovereignty has chosen to only empower cross-shaped ministry, cross-dominated ministry.

So, do you want to have a ministry where the power of God is at work? You see, then it will have to be a jar of clay type ministry.

It will have to be a ministry of weakness, unimpressiveness. Paul is talking about the kind of vessels in the ancient world that would have been easily discarded.

You know, the polystyrene cups perhaps, the paper plates. Just go to the back and have a look at some of them. These are not, I wonder if even our graphics sometimes, it looks a bit old-worldy and this was probably made by an artisan.

No, that is not what we're talking about. These are not bespoke, carefully, you know, ornate jars or golden vases. They are just the most basic and brittle storage containers available.

[14:47] And Paul is saying that that is the kind of ministry, or in fact, rather, those are the kinds of ministers, right, of servants that God works through.

Suffering servants, not spectacular servants. So, in verses 8 and 9, Paul then fleshes out what jars of clay ministry looks like.

And the thing that stands out to me from that list is the first thing Paul says, you notice he begins, we are afflicted in every way, right, in every possible way.

In other words, it's not about, you know, these are the four things that make ministry life tough. It's everything everywhere all at once. Coming as it were from the four corners of the earth, affliction on all sides, five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often

without food, in cold and exposure, and apart from other things, there's the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Right, we'll come to that famous list of Paul's multifaceted afflictions in due course in our series, but for now, just generally speaking, notice that authentic gospel ministry always involves afflictions of all sorts, of all shapes and sizes, you can't escape it, you know, just down by the river, or out in the country, or in church, or in your heart.

[16:44] And at times, when the rain begins to pour, you might start to think to yourself, what just happened? Maybe you cry out to God, did you just see all that?

Right, when your job is under threat, or your house, or your marriage, or your health starts to fall apart, sometimes you'll be in physical danger, sometimes under emotional stress, and the truth is, God sees all that.

And more than that, that is God's plan for us, beloved, to be jars of clay, afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down.

That's when everything's going to plan. And yet, don't forget the but not. You see, the Christian minister is a riddle. What kind of thing is always being struck down is a weak, pathetic, brittle vessel, always being battered, and yet never destroyed.

This vessel is so strange. See, there are two contrasting realities about Paul's life that confront and confuse his audience.

[18:06] On the one hand, he's obviously so frail and weak, he's suffering under the enormous weight of opposition with no real power to defend himself. He's like a pinball getting jolted back and forth from prison to prison, or a kite in a tornado, or an ant under the great magnifying glass of the Roman Empire.

He's weak and puny, pathetic and vulnerable, and yet somehow, on the other hand, he's indestructible. He's unbreakable.

He's still standing with a scarred yet smiling face. You see, there's some enduring life that is sustaining his battered body, some precious power shining through.

What explains these two starkly contrasting aspects of Paul's life and experience, right? It's the treasure within him, the power of God's word and the powerful knowledge of God that keeps renewing him on the inside.

Or in verse 10, it's the life of Jesus. You see, Paul says, we're always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

[19:28] For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you. See, God's plan is that each of us, in union with Christ, right? Because we're connected, united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, in union with Christ, we then display the two most important things about Christ, namely, his death and resurrection.

resurrection. And on the one hand, as jars of clay, we display the humble, weak carpenter who himself was a real man, born in a real, frail human body.

He was persecuted, mocked, beaten, scorned, and ultimately murdered for us. Paul says, we always carry around the death of Jesus in our bodies because it's his disciples.

We're no greater than our master. We're suffering the death of Jesus again and again. But on the other hand, of course, because Jesus didn't stay dead, but he rose from the dead and now he reigns in power and glory and immortality.

[20:40] And so Paul says, we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. See, as Paul keeps dying and yet never dying, always being given over to death and yet living, he keeps showing off both the death of Jesus in his body, but also the powerful, indestructible life of Christ in his body, that unconquerable, indefatigable, triumphant, eternal, immortal life that's within him.

The unbreakable clay jar. What a riddle for all of Paul's hearers. Elsewhere, you remember, he says, I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound.

In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Right?

That is some power, isn't it? The power to endure all things, no matter what life throws at us. Or again, I think of what Paul says in Colossians chapter 1.

When he's praying for the Colossians, he prays that they would be strengthened with all power, not particularly to do miracles or spectacular firework type things, but strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy.

[22:14] And that is some power, isn't it? Not just the power to endure, but the power to enjoy. The power to sing when you're chained up in a dungeon.

The power to jump and leap for joy when you're beaten and humiliated. Remember when the apostles in Acts chapter 5, I love this scene, they're beaten up by the Sanhedrin, they're told never to speak of Jesus again, you know, stop causing so much trouble.

And Luke writes, then they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and from house to house, they didn't cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

See, that is powerful ministry, isn't it? That is the paradox of powerful ministry. That God's power is made perfect in weakness.

We'll come to that later in the book of 2 Corinthians. That the more we are given over to death, the more clearly the life within us shines forth.

[23:22] And the more we are able to bring life to others. See how in verse 12, Paul turns to address the Corinthians, he says, so death is at work in us, but life in you. Right?

Just as by Christ's wounds we are healed, so Paul is saying to the Corinthians, by my wounds you are healed.

And the truth is that this is always the way. I think of the people who have borne the cost for me, who died that I might live.

A long chain of men and women, most of whom I don't know, but I know my parents, I know my pastors over the years, my youth group leaders and so on, I know some of the ways that the cost, of the cost that they have borne for me.

The pressure they were under at times to concede or lie down, choose an easier life, but they didn't. I wonder if you can point to faithful men and women in your life who embraced death at work in them so that life would be at work in you.

[24:31] That is great love. Now in verse 13, there's another way to answer the same question. What keeps Paul going through the trials and tribulations of Christian ministry, it's that life within him.

And then he says in verse 13, since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what has been written, I believed and so I spoke, we also believe and so we also speak.

Now he's quoting from Psalm 116 verse 10 here. In the original context, I'd encourage you to go back and if you really want to dig into it, you know, you ought to go back and read the whole Psalm and have a good think about it.

You won't do that quite now. The Psalmist is crying out to the Lord in deep distress in this Psalm. And he's full of thankfulness and joy to the Lord that the Lord has saved him.

Now you can hear why Paul would think that this Psalm is very relevant for his situation. Listen to verse 6 for instance. The Lord preserves the simple. When I was brought low, he saved me.

[25:33] Or verses 8 and 9. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. And then Paul quotes in, Paul's quote is in verse 10.

The Psalmist says, I believed even when I spoke. I am greatly afflicted. Now the point is that when the Psalmist was in deep distress and crying out to God in pain, that was not despair, but faith. Right? In a sense, in those moments, faith is in its purest form. When you're absolutely at your wit's end and about to give up the faith, you know, and all the earthly props have given way, and then you're forced to cry out to God.

So Paul is saying that that is how his life and ministry operates. He keeps speaking out in faith from the very brink of death. A Christian person is strongest on their knees rather than on their feet. And I think this is something we all know to be true, as paradoxical as it may seem, but that Christian witness is strongest when it's delivered from a place of weakness. I think of our Hope Beyond Cure event earlier in the year.

[26:58] Isn't it far more powerful to hear that God is good, and God is faithful, from the lips of someone who's struggling and weak, rather than someone whose life is apparently perfect?

And I don't want to embarrass them, but I think of Suzanne and Jeremy and Hannah, and the encouragement they've been to us over the last few months, dealing with death, yet testifying to God's faithfulness and goodness.

I think of some of us who are struggling financially, all right, those of us whose families are a bit chaotic or difficult, maybe falling apart. I think of some of the hostility and pressure people have been under, even this week, to keep quiet about Jesus on wear it purple day, or to just water down the message in a school chapel, and you feel weak, don't you?

You feel sick to the stomach. I'm not one of those brave, courageous heroes of the faith, you know, Polycarp or Martin Luther or Philip Jensen.

But, you know, that's precisely the point. And actually, I'm sure that none of those men thought that they were very special either. Because we all feel like jars of clay, because we all are jars of clay, weak and unimpressive, easily broken.

[28:26] And yet, this is precisely how God wants us. Because God, in His glorious wisdom and grace, shows off His power, His power to save, through, and does His work to save, through weakness and shame.

That was the plan. He wants us, hanging there on our own cross, as it were, testifying to His goodness and faithfulness, depending on Him.

Testifying to the light and the life that cannot be extinguished. By the cruel circumstances of life. So, don't think that you have to get your life all sorted out before you can start speaking.

Don't think that powerful people point to a powerful God, and my life would probably be a bit of an embarrassment. Or that God can't use you because you're too pathetic or cowardly or weak or whatever.

No, that's perfect. That's just what we're after. That's the qualification. You know, who is sufficient for these things? We need people who are pathetic. Jars of clay.

[29:42] And so now into verse 14. It's not just that there is life within us to keep us going, but there is also life ahead of us. Right? Paul says, So, we're already experiencing the life of Jesus in our hearts, but more than that, when ministry feels like death, remember the resurrection.

You remember Paul's exultant words at the end of 1 Corinthians, don't you? He says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable. What is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power. Behold, I tell you a mystery.

We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed.

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. Brothers and sisters, our resurrection is coming, and it won't be long now.

[30:58] These weak and dying bodies are not our eternal home. We're just on a camping trip, you know, in temporary tents. But these tents will one day be given a spectacular renovation.

So it will be like my tent, actually. But anyway, I own a spectacular tent. Anyway, that's another story. Given a glorious renovation beyond our wildest dreams, so they're fit for God's kingdom. And most importantly, on that day, we will be brought into the presence of Jesus. Together, I'll be looking at you. You know, we'll be looking left and right. We're all here in the presence of Jesus, face to face.

So when your afflictions, when you're facing afflictions in this life of various kinds, on every side, when you feel the weakness in your flesh and you lament the messiness and the pain of your life, don't give up.

And keep looking to Jesus, looking forward to our future with Him and with each other. And even now, as we gather in church, this is what we're here for.

[32:05] To support and encourage each other. All the more as we see the day approaching. We're looking at the face of Jesus as we listen to the scriptures together. Right?

As we hear the gospel again. That was what we learned about last week. But one day we will see the face of Jesus, you know, just like we're looking at each other now. Face to face. And finally, that brings us to verse 15.

I know we've covered a lot already, but I hope you haven't run out of steam. You know, stick with me. Because this is one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible, I would say. You know, this is just

a beautiful one.

Paul says, And literally he says, As grace extends through more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

Right? So again, I just want to correct the translation slightly. It's not just that grace is reaching more and more people and then stopping at them. No, it's that grace is overflowing through more and more people.

[33:08] It transforms them along the way, but it goes beyond them. It speeds beyond them on its way to others through them. Isn't that a beautiful thought?

That when grace arrives in our lives, it transforms us into channels of grace. And then the right response to grace is thanksgiving.

Right? Someone has been generous to you. You respond with thankfulness. And thanksgiving brings glory to God. Because thanksgiving is about appreciating not just the value of the gift, but the goodness of the giver.

So in the end, Paul's ministry is all for the sake of the Corinthians and for others and all for the glory of God. So as we wrap up, let me just try and talk straight to you again and tell you what's on my heart as I try to respond to God's word in this passage.

The first thing is about Paul's, sorry, about the purpose of Christian ministry. And what stands out to me is that last verse, verse 15, when Paul says to the Corinthians, it's all for you.

[34:20] Brothers and sisters, it is all for your sake. And I want you to know that that's why I'm here. I hope you do.

You know, I'm not here for the money or the power or the prestige. It's all for you. And it's all for the glory of God.

The God we love. Doesn't he deserve to be worshipped and praised and adored by more and more people? Everything we do is about helping people respond to the relentless, lavish grace of God that keeps showering us day after day after day, both in creation and in salvation, in all the blessings we have from one another even.

God's overwhelming kindness and generosity to us that should be turned back in praise and thanksgiving, but is so often taken for granted and ignored when people whinge and complain or pretend that God doesn't exist.

So you see, brothers and sisters, that's what Christian ministry is about. It's about loving other people and loving God. Whether you're a pastor or a parent, right, on this team or that team at church or no team, at all, this is what all Christian ministry is about.

[35:52] All service is about. Loving the people in front of you to the greater glory of God. And secondly, the really big idea of this passage and this whole book really is about the power of Christian ministry.

How God's powerful, life-giving ministry operates through weakness, through the weakness and death of his ministers.

Right? I'll say that again. God's powerful, life-giving ministry operates through the weakness and death of his ministers.

And at one level, I know that's sort of shocking. But when you think about it, it sort of shouldn't be. And this is basic Sunday school stuff.

And I hope they're getting taught this in Sunday school, in kids' church, whatever. Right? That Jesus' death brings me life. By his wounds, we are healed. This is the paradigm for all Christian ministry.

[36:58] Our suffering is not just accidental to what we're doing, but intrinsic to it. Was Jesus' death accidental to his service of us?

No. It's exactly how he brings us life. So perhaps it's best captured in the words of Tertullian. I'm sure we've all been reading out Tertullian lately.

In 200 AD, I'm so familiar with Tertullian. Not really, but I remember this phrase. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. You heard that phrase?

That's Tertullian in about 200 AD. Right? It's about the fact that the killing and persecution of Christians is actually what makes the church grow. Far from stamping it out.

And of course, it's not just in such extreme circumstances that God works. Paul is saying here that he was living in death, living in weakness and death, many years before his own martyrdom.

[37 : 59] So it's the living death of stressed out mums who still find time to calmly and patiently and lovingly read the Bible to their ratty kids each night.

And lonely missionaries who leave behind grandparents and friends and go to places where they are not wanted.

And tired workers who can't afford to buy or even rent, even when they're working so hard. Because they keep using their money not to just live like everyone around them, but to support the cause of the gospel so that others might live.

And it's students whose lecturers and classmates think that they're loonies or bigots. It's about the chronically ill brother or sister holding on to God year after year after year, testifying to his goodness, his love, shining from the inside, even as their body fails them.

Do you see? This is what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus and to minister to others like Jesus. It means social rejection.

[39 : 14] It means physical pain. It means exhaustion. It means emotional turmoil. It means dying every day in a thousand little ways so that others might live.

Let's pray. Loving Father, we are overwhelmed by your love for us.

And we are so thankful for our Lord Jesus that he died on the cross so that by his wounds we might be healed. And thank you for all our Christian brothers and sisters, our forebears down through the centuries who have given up their lives in lots of little sacrificial ways in many, many cases to bring the gospel to us.

To make sure that it was preserved and protected and proclaimed far and wide. We thank you for the people who particularly have been in our lives telling us about Jesus and the cost that they have borne for that.

And we pray, Father, that you would work in our hearts. That even when we are feeling battered and bruised and tired, that your life within us would keep strengthening us and nourishing us so that we can keep serving.

[40 : 38] Keep laying down our lives so that others might live. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.