

A Model Church

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[0 : 00] I'm always so thankful to God that we have this opportunity to listen to his word together. It's not a privilege that we should take for granted, is it? And the question I want us to think about this morning is a very important one.

It's basically the question we're going to be thinking about throughout our series in the book of 1 Thessalonians. The question is, what kind of church do we want to be?

What kind of church do we want to be? And I should say that it seems to me that we are at a critical time in our church life where we should be thinking about this question very carefully.

And addressing it seriously, there are a bunch of things over the last few years that have rocked us, perhaps shaken us up a bit, aren't there? There are people who have left for the church plant or for various reasons.

There was COVID-19, that was pretty tumultuous, wasn't it? There are a number of things, which I think means that we have an opportunity to reiterate and clarify what we stand for, what kind of a church we want to be.

[1 : 06] We have a team working on our constitution at the moment, which we should be very thankful for. But we can't just be a church on paper. What kind of church do we want to be in practice?

And thankfully, the Thessalonians turn out to be a pretty good model for us to imitate. In the New Testament, of course, we read about lots of different kinds of churches, not all great models.

The churches of Galatia. Paul has to strongly rebuke them because they've started wandering off into a false gospel. The church in Corinth, filled with factions and divisions, sexual immorality, triumphalism, selfishness, a complete mess.

The church in Laodicea that Jesus describes as lukewarm in Revelation chapter 3. Materially wealthy but spiritually poor. Lacking in zeal for the Lord.

We don't want to be like that, do we? And of course, there are lots of other churches around us and around the world today that we might either take our cues from or want to distinguish ourselves from.

[2 : 14] Do we want to be a church with a great website and a clear marketing strategy? I suppose so. There are lots of churches that feed the poor and the hungry, that focus on social and political issues.

Should we be more or less involved than we are in those kinds of things as a church? Should we be giving more attention to certain rituals and Christian traditions?

Like saying the creeds, having communion more regularly, celebrating Lent and feast days and so on. Certainly, there are churches just nearby us that are puzzled by how little attention we seem to give to those things.

We often talk about being a Bible teaching church at St. Lucia Bible Church. That's important to us, isn't it? And rightly so.

But of course, even there, there is room for improvement, not least on my part. I hope this won't lead into too much evaluation of the sermon this morning. But I think there are churches we could learn from that would help us to improve.

[3 : 21] How might we do a better job of making sure the Bible teaching is rich and edifying and memorable and transformative? And we don't just want to be a good Bible teaching church, but a good Bible listening church as well.

And we don't just want the Bible teaching to come from the front, actually. We want the Word of Christ to dwell richly among us, saturating our morning tea conversations, our growth groups, our friendships.

How could we grow together to be a church where we're more prepared to listen to God's Word? We're more engaged and attentive. We're more eager to dig deeper, think harder, talk longer about what God is saying to us in this precious book.

A church like the noble Bereans of old. That's another church we would do well to imitate, isn't it? So is that, or what kind of church do we want to be?

Do we want to be a church that is bold in evangelism? And are we willing to change what we do and endure all the pain that necessarily comes with change, so that we might see more people saved?

[4 : 31] Do we want to be a church filled with love and friendship where people feel like they belong? I mean, there are churches where the sermons are shorter, the singing is longer, the kids' program is lighter, the pastors are cooler, although I know that's hard to believe.

But, you know, there are all sorts of churches out there, which all begs the question, what kind of church do we want to be? What will we stand for? Now, before we dive into Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, then, let's just briefly touch on the historical background of the letter.

Thessalonica was located in the Roman province of Macedonia in northern Greece. I'm sorry, I meant to get a map up there for you, but I don't have one. I've already had a comment that Greece is that country with the boot.

It's not. That was just a joke anyway. But hopefully you can get a map of Greece in your head.

Thessalonica's up in the north there. Paul's first visit was recorded for us in Acts chapter 17.

It's about halfway through his second missionary journey. He travels down from Philippi. And when he gets to Thessalonica, just to summarize, he preaches the gospel in the synagogue there on three Sabbath days.

[5 : 48] Some of the people get converted, including lots of Greeks. And that ends up sparking a considerable backlash from a bunch of jealous Jews.

And in Acts 17, Luke tells us, Taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason looking for Paul.

They couldn't find him, however, so they dragged Jason out instead and brought him before the city authorities and ironically charged him with turning the world upside down, having just trashed the city.

Now, the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. Although, in fact, the Thessalonian Jews were so vicious that they even chased Paul out of Berea when they heard that he was preaching there.

So, in the background to this letter, Paul has a kind of, well, has had a kind of sick feeling in his stomach. Not for himself, but for his fledgling church that he left behind in Thessalonica.

[6 : 52] What hope could there possibly be for his little orphans? He really hadn't had any time to establish them, to ground them in the faith. They were sort of sitting ducks for the devil.

Fragile saplings, tender shoots, little babes, Davids against Goliath. They seemed easy pickings for the devil and liable to be crushed by the world and their opponents in the city.

Now, skip ahead a few months, maybe six months or even a year later, but not much more. Paul is now in Corinth as he sits down to write this letter to the Thessalonians.

Because he's just received a report from Timothy that actually the Thessalonians are going really well. Everything's been going fantastically in Thessalonica by the power of the gospel and God's grace.

So, in the end, this letter is filled with great relief and joy. And Paul recounts all of this that I've been telling you in chapter 3, which we'll come to in the next few weeks.

[7 : 56] We won't go into any more detail now, though. That just sets the scene for us, though, I think. The thing to note is that given the circumstances, Paul had feared the worst. But now, having heard this good report from Timothy, he's overjoyed to hear how the Thessalonians have been going, how they've been holding up under pressure, even flourishing.

And so he writes this letter. Verse 1. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

So, in some ways, Paul's introduction is pretty standard. He begins with his usual greeting. As is very often the case, it's not just him writing these letters, but he has a couple of co-authors.

He mentions Silvanus, who goes by Silas elsewhere. And remember, he had been with Paul when he visited Thessalonica. And, of course, Timothy, the messenger, gets mentioned as well.

So, Paul is going to talk consistently in the first person plural about we and us and so on throughout the letter. The one thing that does make this greeting quite unusual, though, is the word in, in verse 1.

[9 : 09] Particularly how Paul says that the Thessalonians are in God the Father. You see that? They're in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's where they're located, as it were. And what's interesting about that particular comment is that none of the other churches are described in this way. No other church in the New Testament, as far as I can tell, having chased it up a little bit.

In Christ comes up a lot, but not in God the Father. I actually even found one scholar deny that it ever happens. But it does happen here.

And the only other time we see it, actually, is in two Thessalonians. Which is interesting, isn't it? Why does Paul want the Thessalonians, especially, to know that they are in God the Father?

Well, as usual, Paul is flagging something right at the top of the letter that is going to permeate everything else he's going on to say.

[10 : 10] And the main thing that we're going to see is that being in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ means that the Thessalonians will face suffering, but they'll also be safe.

Suffering, they will be hated by the world because the world hates God and they are in Him and we are in Him.

More on that later. And yet safety because in God we are invincible. If God is for us, who can be against us? The Father's love is a strong and mighty fortress.

And so throughout the letter, Paul will associate being in God and in Christ with having boldness and steadfastness in the face of suffering. Now, as he moves into the main body of the letter, verse 2, Paul begins retelling the story of how the Thessalonians got converted and by way of thanking God for them and where they're at.

He says in verse 2, So the important thing to notice first is that Paul doesn't thank the Thessalonians.

[11 : 35] He thanks God. Why? Because God is the one who has worked within them, who works within us, to grant faith and love and hope. By nature, we don't find these things within ourselves.

It's not just that we happen to be people of faith. We're all faithless. At least we don't put our faith in God. Just like the rest of mankind. We're all hateful.

We don't naturally love God or love our neighbors. And we're all hopeless. That is, wandering towards eternity without hope. And we can't turn ourselves around.

It's only in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ that these things become ours. God grants faith, love and hope to us. Literally, Paul says in verse 3 that our faith, love and hope are not in Jesus, but he says of Jesus.

They're of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, first and foremost, they belong to Him. They're His. He has given them to us. Our faith is really the gift of faith that He has given to us.

[12 : 44] So Paul keeps wanting to stress that it all starts with God. And as far as our opening question goes then, there could be nothing more important to get right than this, could there?

What kind of church do we want to be? Well, surely, above all, we want to be God's church, don't we? Created by God.

Sustained by Him. Formed and fed by His Word. God ruled and united by His risen Son. We are not merely a club or a society gathering on the basis of human initiative.

We are not here by our own intelligence or morality. Because we like this kind of thing. We like sitting together and singing together and closing our eyes or something.

That's just our vibe. And we are not here for our own purposes or because of our own preferences. We're not here to make a name for ourselves.

[13 : 51] In the end, the church is a gathering that God has made by calling people out of darkness and granting them faith. And next, notice what faith, hope, and love do.

The kind of faith Christ gives drives people to work. The kind of hope Christ gives flows out in labor. The kind of love Christ gives makes us steadfast, endure, persevering. So in their own way, faith, love, and hope each drive a whole new lifestyle.

Particularly a new work ethic. A new work ethic. Paul thanks God for the radical transformation that he has worked in the Thessalonians that has driven them to work.

And he keeps praying that God will continue to work in them. We saw something in this over Easter, didn't we? When Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, talking about himself and his own conversion.

[14:57] His own untimely birth. Of course, you don't choose your own birth. It's all of grace. And then Paul says, But by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace toward me was not in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them. That was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. See that same dynamic again?

God's grace at work within us drives us to work. Far from rendering us unconscious puppets or kind of passive spectators.

Just looking at what God is doing in the world. No, when God's work gets to work within us, that actually drives us to work too. Conversely, this is a challenge to us.

It might be a rebuke. If we're not working hard for the Lord, then it begs the question, doesn't it? Is God's grace at work within us? Faith, love, hope, will, drive, work, labor, steadfastness.

[16:05] In some churches, and I'm not talking about us, but just to comment on the nature of some churches, sometimes 20% of the people are doing all the work.

Or 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work. A church where 20% of the people are doing all the work is a church where the grace of God is at work in 20% of the people. And of course, I don't mean specifically that you have to be on a roster or something like that.

That's ridiculous. There are lots of different ways to work for the Lord and abound in the work of the Lord. But whatever it is, God's people will be hard workers. What kind of church do we want to be? A faith, love, hope church? Well, that will be a hardworking church. For the glory of God. By the grace of God.

Next, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the gospel of God. In verses 4 and 5. For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

[17:20] You know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake. So the big point here is that God works by his word. Specifically, he has been at work in the Thessalonians by his gospel.

Note the little word for at the beginning of verse 4. Paul is still explaining why he's thankful to God for the Thessalonians. And again, it's because ultimately he attributes everything he sees in them to God.

To God's election in verse 4. And to God's gospel in verse 5. Verse 4. We know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you. And that's what theologians would call election.

It's just the idea that God's people were chosen by him before the foundation of the world. But he chose us before we chose him. And he chose us not on the basis of anything particularly special about us.

Just as an expression of his grace and love and his freedom. Notice Paul ties the two together in this verse. We are God's children.

[18:24] Brothers and sisters together. Loved by God. And chosen by him. Now verse 5 is a little bit trickier.

The main thing I think we need to be careful about with this verse is that we don't skip ahead too quickly. When Paul says, Our gospel came to you, not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

I don't think... This is how I've sort of always taken it beforehand. But then when I really studied it, I've changed my mind on it. I don't think he's talking just yet about how the Thessalonians received the gospel.

I think he'll get to that in a moment. For now, he's talking about how the gospel was preached to them. That it was preached with power in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

And that that is evidence of God's love for them. And his choice of them. That he sent his gospel to them.

[19:32] And partly what sort of drives me in this direction or leads me in this direction is that in the Greek, the sentence doesn't really end there. It just sort of flows on with an important conjunction.

So Paul talks about preaching with power in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. Just as you know what kind of men we prove to be among you. Just as you know what kind of men we prove to be among you.

Right? So just as you know how we lived among you. See, Paul is saying that he knows the Thessalonians are loved by God and chosen by him. First, and this will be his first point but not his last point.

But first, because God sent his gospel to them. Wrapped in power and the Holy Spirit and conviction. On the lips of preachers who boldly declared the gospel to them and lived exemplary lives of integrity among them.

God showed his love for them. In sending his gospel to them. On the lips of the apostle Paul. A man who lived for them and not for themselves.

[20 : 39] Who poured himself out for them. And brothers and sisters, hasn't God been extraordinarily loving to us? That on the far side of the world, the gospel should have come to us.

On the lips of many faithful men over the years. Not least Roy. And let me compliment him while he's away. So it's not too awkward. He's on holiday. Just to tell you how much I love him.

But I'm thinking of others like Keith Birchley or Michael Bennett, Dave Pitt. Not every church has such well-trained, godly, faithful men of conviction and integrity.

That God has given us. And we can be very thankful for God's love for us through these men. Now in verse 6, Paul does move on though, I think, to talk about how the Thessalonians received the gospel.

He says, And you became imitators of us and of the Lord. For you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. So that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

[21 : 44] You see how in verse 6, a kind of imitation chain is developing. Paul mentions how the Thessalonians began to imitate them and the Lord. Then how they became an example to other believers across the whole region.

And you see what the behavior is that keeps spreading. It's that they receive the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Now ultimately, this is the aim of preaching.

And again, not just preaching from a pulpit. But preaching and teaching one another. Whenever we share the gospel, we're not just passing on information.

We're calling on people to imitate us. As we imitate Christ. To respond to the gospel as we have done. To live in faith, love and hope.

Hopefully the way that we are living. To work hard and be our co-workers. And you see, not to labor the point. But that's why I think it's so important to slow down in verse 5.

[22 : 49] To see that Paul was talking about the way he preached the gospel and lived among them in verse 5. Because now in verse 6, that's where we're being told about the Thessalonians.

And how they became imitators of Paul. They started living a new way and preaching the same gospel, do you see? So this is what Paul meant, I think.

By preaching the gospel in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. He's not talking about working miracles or anything like that. Though he was able to do that at times.

But he's talking about preaching with backbone. And with joy in the face of much affliction. In the midst of suffering and opposition. The kind of thing that happened to him in Thessalonica.

Just skip down a few verses later to chapter 2, verse 2. We'll see Paul riff on this theme. He says, See, that's the kind of spirit-empowered ministry Paul is talking about.

[23 : 58] The spirit brings boldness in the face of much conflict. The kind of backbone and courage that we need to keep speaking the gospel. And we'd rather keep our heads down. Or again, Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 1.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you. Through the laying on of my hands. For God gave us a spirit not of fear. But of power and love and self-control.

Again, that's why Paul is so thankful for the Thessalonians. Because having heard the gospel, they immediately joined the ranks of gospel proclaimers.

They joined the ranks of spirit-filled, Christ-imitating, suffering gospel preachers. And indeed, they became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

That is pretty much across the whole of Greece. Macedonia is in the north, where Philippi and Thessalonica are. Achaia is in the south, where Corinth and Athens are. And it didn't stop there.

[25 : 00] Again, verse 8 is a slightly tricky verse to translate. But the not only there, I think, modifies Macedonia and Achaia. Rather than the word of the Lord. So, here's how the CSB puts it.

Paul says, The word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia. But in every place that your faith in God has gone out. Again, you see the subtle difference.

The point is, first and foremost, the gospel spread from Thessalonica. I mean, Chrysostom, one of the church fathers, compares the Thessalonian influence to that of Alexander the Great.

Because Alexander the Great was also a Macedonian. In other words, he says, The gospel, the word of the Lord, went out from Thessalonica all over the world.

All over the world. It rang out everywhere. Far beyond Greece. Not at the edge of a sword, of course. And as the gospel went out, reports about the Thessalonians went out as well.

[26 : 07] Because preaching and imitation go together. Learning to imitate those who imitate Christ is part of why we gather in fellowship together and come to church, isn't it?

The Thessalonian testimony went out alongside the gospel. Which brings us finally to verses 9 and 10. Paul tells us what people were saying. This is how the Thessalonians responded to the gospel. And there are basically three things. They turned, serve, to serve, and to wait. And I have a sneaking suspicion that these three things in verses 9 and 10 line up with what Paul has already said about faith, love, and hope earlier in the chapter.

Though that might be a bit too neat. But you might have to think about that over morning tea. But does turn, serve, wait line up with faith, love, hope? Anyway, have a think about it.

But you see what Paul says. The Thessalonians turned, first of all. See, to believe that Jesus is Lord means that Caesar is not Lord.

[27 : 19] Zeus is not Lord. Sex is not Lord. Money is not Lord. And perhaps most confronting of all, I am not Lord. This, of course, is why the gospel is always so offensive to the natural man.

Or the man of the flesh, the sinful man. And provokes hostility because it demands repentance.

God will not settle for a place among a pantheon of other gods.

So turning to God always involves a turning away from the gods of the world. As we say yes to God, we are inevitably saying no to the world. And secondly, you see what Paul says in verse 9.

We turn towards God to serve him. The word is in fact the slavery word because our service is not optional. We now belong to God 24-7.

He bought us so he owns us. And again, you think about the volatility of this transition. We were all once slaves to sin and darkness.

[28 : 32] Living our lives under the rule of Satan. But when a person gets converted, the gospel sets them free from slavery to sin. And makes them slaves of God. Christ plunders the possessions of the strong man.

But of course the devil does not let his captives escape lightly. So he continues to prowl around like a roaring lion seeking to devour us. Our old master still wants us to present ourselves for his service every morning.

And he is furious when we don't. Turning away from idols provokes hostility. Slaving away in honour of our new master provokes hostility.

And then lastly, Paul says the Christian life is about waiting. Verse 10. You turn to God from idols. To serve the living and true God. And to wait for his son from heaven.

Whom he raised from the dead. Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. Sometimes people criticise Christianity for being too future focused.

[29 : 39] But we are very focused on the future. And we ought not to be ashamed of it. We are focused on the skies. Sometimes we have our head in the clouds as it were.

If our hope in Christ was for this life only. Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Then it would not be worth it. Because of how mistreated we are.

No, we live for the future. We are people of hope. And Paul will spell this out particularly in chapters 4 and 5 of this letter. We'll see that when we come to them. Suffice to say for now that there is a day of wrath coming.

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus has set that in stone. Now that he sits on the throne, the axe is at the root of the trees. And all of God's people are waiting for it to fall.

With confidence. Not with fear. Because we know that it won't fall on us. And we look forward to that day with eager anticipation. When our Lord Jesus will finally descend from heaven.

[30 : 47] And meet out perfect justice. To obtain his perfect victory. And sit enthroned in glory forever and ever.

And this is why we endure suffering now. Because we are waiting in hope. We live in hope. When an angry world is swirling around us. We don't lose heart.

We wait. When slandered. We wait for vindication. When criticized. We wait for Jesus' commendation. When humiliated.

We wait for exaltation. The first will be last. And the last will be first. The proof of this of course is Jesus' own death and resurrection. Jesus was the man.

The world said no to. His own people did not receive him. The Romans crucified him as the scum of the earth. But God raised him to life again. And honored him.

[31 : 45] And exalted him above every name that can be named. And he said no to God. Likewise be assured friends. That those who endure suffering in this life. For the sake of the Lord Jesus.

And for his gospel. Will in the next life be honored and lifted up. Becoming a Christian means turning and serving. Which will always provoke opposition.

And so it's always about waiting as well. By remaining faithful in the midst of suffering. With the joy of the Holy Spirit. We look forward to sharing in the vindication and victory of our risen king.

So it's time to wrap up. What kind of church do we want to be? And in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. We find a model for us to follow. We don't have all of our questions answered of course.

It's not as if Paul gets into the practical details. Of how to run the kids program. Or how the church rosters should be organized. I can't imagine they didn't have rosters. Wild. But he lays out for us the important things.

[32 : 51] At SLBC. Do we want to be a church of faith. Love and hope. And necessarily then a church that works hard.

That labors tirelessly in service to God. And to one another. In the proclamation of the gospel. To our neighbors. To a dead and dying world. Grace and God's work in our lives.

Far from rendering us passive agents. Who just sit back and consume. No. God's grace always motivates and empowers exuberant work. Again I think of Ephesians chapter 2 on this one.

Remember the line in Ephesians 2. We are God's workmanship. Created in Christ Jesus for good works. Across the scriptures it's always this way.

We who have experienced God's grace. And God's work in our lives. In turn. Have good works prepared for us to do. And we have a new power from God to do them.

[33 : 54] So. Maybe this is something we should be discussing over morning tea. How can we do better at SLBC. To cultivate a community of deeper faith. Of more fervent love.

And more solid hope. Where our hope is increasingly eclipsing our horizon. Could we be harder at work. Not under the burden of rules and regulations and rosters.

Or anxiously seeking God's favor. But with God's grace flowing through our lives. Could we be looking for more opportunities to serve.

In love and enjoy together. To pull together as a team. And abound in the work of the Lord. And secondly of course the Thessalonians are a church. Characterized by.

Suffering. Do we want to be a church. That suffers. Do we want to be a church. That suffers with joy. And faithfulness.

[34 : 54] We always have a choice. Between being a church of comfort. Or of suffering. We could be a sort of comfortable establishment church.

Well respected by our neighbors. Or we could be a church of the crucified king. Jesus said to his disciples. If the world hates you.

Know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you are of the world. The world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world. But I chose you out of the world.

Therefore the world hates you. Paul reminds the Thessalonians. That they are a church. Loved by God and chosen by him. We are a church loved by God.

And chosen by him. We will necessarily therefore be hated by the world. Because he has chosen us. Out of the world. James.

[35 : 54] The brother of our Lord. Writes in James chapter 4 verse 4. You adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world. Is enmity with God. Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world. Makes himself an enemy of God.

Again and again you see. We cannot have it both ways. We don't want to be adulterous do we. That is the adulterous problem isn't it. Wants to have it both ways.

Not single minded. Faithful. We can't seek comfort. And respectability. And admiration from the establishment.

From the universities. From the well to do schools around here. From the government. From our colleagues. We always want to be good hard workers. Kind and respectful citizens.

Not worthy of any slander. But we mustn't. Seek their approval. Or let ourselves become beholden. To the establishment and their ideas. We mustn't pursue.

[36 : 57] Community acceptance. A sympathetic media. Christian values. Being honoured in the public square. Even while people hate our Lord Jesus Christ. Now instead.

We need to be ready. And we need to teach our children to be ready. To steal ourselves for the inevitable hatred. That comes with being a follower of Jesus. We need to think about this question together.

How can we do better? At coming together and supporting each other. When we face hatred from the world. How can we make sure that the culture around us. Doesn't infiltrate and poison our fellowship together.

Dividing and weakening our resolve to serve Christ. We want to be a church where. We who have turned from our old lives of sin. Live industrious lives of service.

To the true and living God. No matter the cost. Eagerly waiting in hope. For the return of our King. Let's pray. Loving Father.

[38 : 11] Give us faith. Love and hope. Fill us with these things. That we might be bold. In serving you. In working hard. For you.

For your glory. For the gospel. For the love of each other. And for all mankind. Fill us with your spirit. And with great joy.

Even in the face of suffering. That your word might ring out. Across Queensland and Australia. Not for our reputation.

Or glory. For the glory of our Lord and Saviour Jesus. And you pray that he would come soon. Amen.