

Practical Redemption: Romans 8

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[0 : 00] Good to see you all. I hope you all enjoyed the 48 hours of false fall that we had. We're now back to the heat of summer. So for those of you who don't know me, my name is Matt. I'm a part of the preaching team here at the table, and I'm wrapping up our series today on Romans.

So before we get into Romans, I want to start with a little bit of a confession that you're probably not meant to share from the front of the stage of a church. But I grew up in church. I spent most of my life in and around the church, and for the majority of my time, I had no idea really what it meant to be a Christian.

I don't think I got it. And I don't know if any of you who grew up in the church can sort of relate to this, but you sort of have this moment of, oh, yes, I pray the special prayer, follow that Roman road that Pastor Teneda and a few others have talked about.

And that was sort of it, right? Like nothing seemed to feel like it changed. It sort of felt like there was this, okay, I've said this prayer so that when I die, I don't go to the bad place.

And great, cool. And then the other part of that was you were also meant to spend your time telling other people about how important it was that they believed in Jesus so they also didn't go to this bad place.

[1 : 10] And I spent a lot of my time feeling really guilty that, like, one, I didn't particularly want to talk to people about why they shouldn't go to the bad place, because I seemed to spend most of my life convincing them that this bad place existed in the first place.

And two, like, what were we really selling them? Like, hey, you get to come to church on Sunday, sing these weird songs. And in my church back home, they still had an organ, so you would listen to an organ play and people in the old, you know, sort of vestiment robes talk about the Bible from dusty scriptures.

And then you went to work on Monday, or you went to school on Monday. And so I spent a lot of my life kind of wondering, like, what is this thing that I've signed up for? And then I went to college. And in college, I learned that the reason that faith is important is that everyone you see around you is deeply, deeply unhappy.

And you can tell that they're unhappy because they do things like go out partying, drink, have casual sex with their partners. You can tell that they're so deeply unhappy because they're doing all of these awful things.

And the message of the gospel is that in order to stop doing these things that prove you're unhappy, you need to believe in Jesus. And then you'll be transformed into someone who doesn't do all these things that are so obviously things that people do when they're unhappy.

[2 : 26] There's absolutely no reason at all that champagne is celebrated, associated with joy. It's sad. It's bad. So that was my faith experience for a long time.

And to be clear, like, I'm sure some people who do, you know, spend a lot of time drinking and throw themselves into their work and have lots of casual sex, some of them probably are unhappy. But if you've ever met a group of Christians, you'll find some of them are unhappy too.

So the message of the gospel can't just be I feel happy now. And so a couple of years later, I was part of a different ministry. And the ministry leader explained this sort of thing I had with this understanding of Christianity that I had is what he called toothpaste Christianity.

And what he said was, I don't know if this was the same in the States, but back in Britain, sort of early 2000s, there were all of these commercials for toothpaste. And they all basically said, you have to buy this specific type of toothpaste that's got this specific new enzyme in it.

Because what you don't know about yourself is that there's all of these diseases that are rotting your teeth. And this toothpaste has been specifically designed to prevent this disease so that in 40,

50 years, your teeth don't fall out.

[3 : 41] And if that sounds a bit like the gospel that some of us learned growing up, it's probably because it is, right? There was this hedge against the future. And then at the end, there was always some person who, you know, some dentist who said, yes, you have to use this toothpaste because I just had a patient in my office and I literally had to amputate their head because their teeth were so bad.

And so everyone got very scared and bought this toothpaste. But the reality is there's got to be more to the gospel than that, right? If the gospel is this, if it's just this hedge against the, you know, the future of not going to the bad place or this desire to sit in judgment over all these people that are happily enjoying their lives because we can't, don't have the courage to do the things that they're doing.

That can't be right. That can't be what the gospel is about. So I want to talk today about one way that this walk with Jesus, this relationship with Jesus, this life that we call following Jesus lives out. And we're going to do that using Romans 8. I will say that there are literally books that have been written on this single chapter. And I promise you we're not going to spend time going through the power and the might of every word.

But we're going to talk a little bit about what it means to live out a life of following Jesus. So we're going to be in Romans 8. We'll start with verse 12. I believe this is from the NIV.

[5 : 01] But if you want to follow along on your phone, most of the versions are pretty similar. So Paul says, And by him we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs. Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If indeed we share in Christ's suffering in order that we might also share in his glory.

I consider our present sufferings not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us. For creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

For creation was subjected to frustration and decay, not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that creation itself would be liberated from its bondage and brought to freedom and the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole of creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to this present time. Not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption to sonship and the redemption of our bodies.

[6 : 37] For in this hope we are saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not have yet, but we wait patiently for it.

In the same way, the Spirit helps in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for. But the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts and knows the minds of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

So we're not going to unpack all of that today, because we don't have the time. But I want to take a little journey through this passage and think about how it answers that initial frustration that I had. Like, what is this Christian life all about? So let's start with verse 12, where Paul is sort of wrapping up his thought that he's been following through most of chapter 7 and the early part of chapter 8, about this sort of body-spirit dichotomy.

We have this obligation, but it's not to the flesh to live according to it. Instead, we have this obligation to the Spirit. And I want to say that I think the Church has done some harm in how we've applied this sort of body-spirit dichotomy in the past.

[7 : 53] I think it's an example of how we can use Scripture to shame people for their bodies, or try and make this case that bodies themselves are inherently bad.

Some of us may have been told things like, our body is distracting. Our body is impeding others from worship. That it's broken. That it's desirable, but somehow not lovable.

And I want to be really clear here that Paul isn't saying any of that. Our bodies are not bad. We see at the end of the passage that we just read, that Paul talks about this hope of the redemption of our bodies.

He doesn't talk about the escape of our bodies or the discarding of these unhelpful meat suits that we walk around in. Our bodies are good. And also, I want to say that actually this body-spirit dichotomy isn't really the point Paul's making.

I think we can sometimes get caught up in this idea that there's this sort of dichotomy that exists. A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Tonetto went through chapter one and was sort of like, here's this, this, this, and this.

[8 : 57] And then this. And it caught the readers by surprise because they were following along. They're sort of, yes, that's bad, that's bad, that's bad. Wait, what? And I think there's something here that Paul's doing a similar thing.

He's using the same literary idea of creating two things that seem opposed to each other and then sort of turning them on his head. So I think there's almost a false dichotomy here. And I think Paul knows what he's doing.

He's created this false dichotomy between the body over here and the spirit over here. They're not two separate things. If you want an example of how we do this today, if anyone's familiar with cognitive behavioral therapy, essentially we split our experience into thoughts, emotions, and actions.

And the idea of therapy is that you influence one of those, you can start to influence all the others. I'm not going to talk about that today. We don't have time. But if you stop and think about it for more than half a second, the human experience is way more than emotions, thoughts, and actions, in the same way that Paul knows that the human experience that he's writing about is way more than just the body and the spirit.

But they're useful containers to understand our experience. The body and the spirit can't be separated. You can't separate thoughts and emotions. You can't separate actions from thoughts.

[10 : 08] But a few verses earlier in chapter 7, and Paul's basically lamenting this sort of, why am I doing all of these things that I don't want to do? In chapter 7, verse 15, he talks about later on.

He says, I do not understand what it is that I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do. I do not do the good that I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing.

And so Paul, I think, is trying to rationalize that experience. Right? We know that there are these good things that we want to do. We know that there are these good things that we are striving to do, but something's getting in the way.

And it's not that our body is this evil container that's holding us back from being good, but we live in this space where, you know, I really need to do laundry, but the couch is comfortable.

It's easy to blame the body, right? The body is comfortable, but also your brain's real comfortable when you're sat on the couch, and your brain doesn't want to do laundry. And it's got nothing to do with your body and the brain being separate.

[11 : 14] It's our whole body wants to do this thing, and our whole body also doesn't. But that's a weird way to conceptualize it. So we split it into these two different experiences. And I think that's what Paul's doing here.

He's created this body as one, as sort of the example of us not doing what we want to do. And the spirit of the spirit, which is, here's the thing that we're trying to do, what we're trying to get at.

And so when we go through this passage, what I want us to think about in this example is not think of bodies as physical bad bodies and spirit as sort of ethereal good spirit, but to think of the body as sort of our resigned not doing things, and the spirit as sort of a call to be better, to do better, to work harder.

The body is this place of comfort, of sort of false peace, as it were, whereas the spirit is calling us into true peace, which I realize was a very short way of getting through that passage.

But for the purpose of this, let's think about the body as this desire to be comfortable and the spirit as this desire to move forward. And I think that that leads us into really the meat of this passage.

[12 : 31] If our bodies are good, then we're also not just a home for our souls, right? We are this body that is waiting to be redeemed.

But if our bodies are waiting for full redemption, then there's also this process of transformation that we're supposed to be engaging in now. If we're not just waiting around for heaven, if we're not just waiting around for this sort of spiritual plane in the future, if our bodies are good, if our human experience is relevant now, then we can't avoid the physical realities of now.

We have to engage in our own transformation. And I think one of the great sins of the Western church is that we think of all of these promises of God. We think of all of this promise of redemption, of salvation, of heaven, as something over there.

In the future, in heaven, all this will be resolved. And right now, we just have to live through this suckiness, and in heaven, all will be solved. But I don't think that's how Paul understood the world, and it's not how a lot of the churches outside of our sort of European Western understanding of the world, understanding church.

If you look at liberation theology, which is a Latin American theology, one of the sort of the grandfathers of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, talks about this idea of us looking at the world, and seeing the world beyond, or heaven, rather transformed and fulfilled in this present life.

[14:07] So we're not seeing heaven as some distant thing, but we're seeing that our present life today is transformation and fulfillment. The absolute value of salvation, he says, far from devaluing this world, gives this world its authentic meaning, because salvation is already here.

Salvation, in Paul's understanding, in most other non-Western traditions' understanding, isn't the promise of heaven in the land beyond, but a life lived now, our physical bodies in a physical world, living into transformation.

And Paul suggests this too. And again, I think some of how we've misread Romans through our Western lens is if we take verse 17, where Paul says, if we're God's children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

And if you're anything like me, you learned that that meant that our inheritance is in heaven. It's always over there. But I don't think that's what Paul meant. And part of that is that we tend to think about an inheritance as something that we receive when someone dies.

We think of it as sort of a monetary inheritance. But for most of human history, being an heir or receiving an inheritance had little to do with financial transactions.

[15:32] It was more how we use the language today when we think about the heir to the throne or the heir to this business empire. Most of human history, when someone took on an inheritance, they took on the vocation and in some cases, the sort of the identity of the head of the family.

Just as an aside, we tend to pass this story through as like the father passed the business to his son. It's a bit of a modern patriarchal reading of history. Women often passed on their businesses and their identity to their children and their daughters.

But if we put all of that historical sexism aside, and that as another aside to the aside, is the reason why, if you read a lot of these translations, most of scripture, translators have worked really hard to use gender-neutral language, to use inclusive language, to not just talk about, you know, you are the children of God rather than the son of God.

But here, if you look at, in most scriptures, the word sonship and inheritance or the word sonship comes up a lot. And part of that is that that was, again, sort of understanding this concept of inheritance, right?

It generally passed on to the son in a historical reading, even though that's not universally true. So the reason that there isn't gender-neutral language in this passage in the way that there is in other places is partly that, this understanding of we're passing on identity to usually the firstborn son.

[16:51] So, to come back to where we were a few minutes ago, an inheritance is not a pot of money that you get when someone dies. An inheritance is taking on the vocation and the identity of the person who came before you.

So, you know, when Jane Butcher, the senior, stopped being the local butcher, she passes on the title of butcher, the vocation of butcher, and sort of the identity as the butcher of the village to their child.

And so that framework for heirship or inheritance doesn't make a lot of sense if we think about, well, one day we'll be with Jesus in heaven as co-heirs. It's actually, to the people who were receiving this letter, inheritance was, I'm taking on this new vocation.

I'm taking on this identity of this person. Or to look at it another way, maybe here in D.C. we're not that great at wrapping our heads around a familial passing on of businesses, but in other places, Paul talks about us being ambassadors to Christ.

And in D.C. we know something about ambassadors. We know something about the role of embassies and what an ambassador does. And so again, it's that same idea, right?

[18:00] It's this taking on, as an ambassador, in another country, you are taking on the sort of the embodiment of the place that you represent in this new place. We are called to inherit both the identity and the vocation of God.

When Madison read the announcements, one of the things that she said was that our vision at the table here is to embody a more beautiful gospel that announces collective liberation and the renewal of all things.

Our role as taking on this vocation of God is here and now. God's in the business of renewing all things.

God's in the business of collective liberation. If we are his heirs, if we are taking on his inheritance, that's our role too. So we'll come to a little bit of how we sort of do that in a minute because whilst several of the sermons we've heard over the past few weeks have been very critical of Paul for sort of giving out these lists of things that we're supposed to do or not do, in this passage, Paul doesn't give us anything in terms of what we're supposed to do to live out this liberative vocation.

So we'll talk a little bit about how we get into that in a minute. But partly, part of the role of understanding our vocation is seeing what God's up to in the world.

[19:23] What's God doing? Because if we're inheriting his vocation and his identity, we should probably figure out what he's up to. Paul gives us a couple of hints. In verse 21, he talks about the earth being liberated from its bondage to decay.

And a couple of verses later, in 22, he talks about the whole of creation has been groaning. And also that we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan as we await our adoption and the redemption of our bodies.

So in there, perhaps, and again, books have been written about this passage, so one way of looking at it, perhaps this vocation that God has given us lies in our response to the restoration of our groaning planet and the transformation of us as individuals.

And if we have this God vocation, if we are supposed to follow in the footsteps of what God was doing, we do have the sort of the literal embodiment of what God was interested in doing on earth in the person of Jesus.

Jesus walked around living his life, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, releasing those held captive, disrupting systems of power and empire. Jesus ate with sinners, sought out the restoration and redemption of those that the religious leaders, that high society, had written off as the worst of the worst.

[20:50] And, as our communion liturgy reminds us, Jesus did all those things, and at the end, he was lynched for it. And this is important to pause on, that Jesus was lynched for engaging in collective liberation and the renewal of all things brings into, maybe a sharper relief, this command to avoid the desires of the body, to avoid this place of comfort.

this work is hard. Following the work that God is doing on earth is counter-cultural. It's directly challenging to systems of power.

And that might explain why Paul talks so much about suffering in these verses, particularly in verse 17 and 18, where he talks about, literally, this present suffering is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed.

But the suffering that we endure in following in the footsteps of Jesus can look like a couple of things. I think one, it's because we're literally paying attention to the world around us.

If you have any empathy at all and you see humans on the planet groaning in pain, that's going to cause you some suffering yourself. And Paul suggests, in verse 23, that one of the signs of sort of the first fruits of the Spirit is that we feel this pain.

[22:13] We see what's wrong with the world around us and it hurts us. We see the world is broken. And as a result of that, this vocation that we have from God is to go and respond to that brokenness.

But that doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt, right? Even if you're working to respond to something, that doesn't mean there isn't pain along the way. That doesn't mean you don't keep getting drawn back to the suffering that you see. And that's where this sort of this body, this desire for comfort, we want to deny the pain of the world around us because it's too much.

If we don't look at the world, we can focus on our own survival, our own security, our own livelihood. Or if we do look at the world around us and we somehow, for whatever reason, can't draw ourselves away, we can lean into this sort of cynicism of, well, nothing can work.

The world is just broken. So you know what we'll do? We'll wait for heaven. And so there's this suffering piece of knowing that the world is broken.

There's also the real reality or the real threat of physical suffering. No one who has been a leader, if you go through the list of leaders of liberative movements throughout history, you will find a lot of

them in prison, you will find a lot of them executed, you will find a lot of them suffering physically, emotionally, and materially.

[23 : 35] And even on a smaller scale today, if you want to work for, say, the alleviation of poverty, you will likely not get rich and probably shouldn't.

But anyway, that's... If you want to address the root causes of violence, you have to scramble as a tiny nonprofit to get a few small grants from the local council.

But if you want to be at Metro PD, you can blow your overtime budget by 200%. And again, this isn't just... That's not suffering in sort of the broadest sense of the word, but this idea that we know that actually if we just sold out, if we just decided to stop working for liberation and community care and instead just went to work for Deloitte and told everyone about how community care was bad, we'd be fine.

And the gospel, the call of God, is the antidote to that. Also, here, just as an aside, this isn't to sort of make sweeping generalizations about the whole human experience or for what it's worth to lionize poverty.

Just because you're poor doesn't necessarily mean you're collectively working for liberation. And if you are comfortable and can pay your bills each month without worrying about it, it doesn't mean that you are disconnected from the work of liberation.

[24 : 54] But the call that God puts on us is to engage in this work and that may come with costs. It may come with material costs. It may come with physical costs. It may come with more serious, long-term harm.

And again, going back to the start, going back to verses 12 and 13, this idea of our lack of obligation to the body, our lack of obligation to our own comfort. The call is to look into what God's Spirit is doing, what God is doing in us and through us, stepping away from our own comfort and into God's vocation.

And again, that doesn't necessarily mean that you will take a vow of poverty and live in sackcloth and ashes for all of your life. But we should be prepared. We should be ready to say, you know what, there will be some sort of physical material suffering.

So, the Spirit of God gives us this sense that something is wrong with the world and that we are called to deny our own comfort and to engage in that.

But the Spirit of God does something else. And this is what Paul is talking about when he talks about this idea of hope and waiting for what we hope for. The Spirit gives us this sense, this true sense that the world is broken.

[26 : 06] But it also gives us this security in the hope of future restoration. Sometimes the pain of the present is overwhelming, right? Sometimes the pain of there's so much going on, but the Spirit also gives us hope for the future.

The Spirit calls us away from these self-protective messages. It calls us away from, you know, let me retreat into my own house and be comfortable. Let me not deal with the pain.

You know, we see this, I don't know if you know folks like this, but I know several people who look and sound like me and have very similar experiences to me, who will say, I can't watch the news, it's too much. I'm not sure that that's okay.

I think there are moments where we have to collectively, where we have to decide what's good to take care of us, but we also can't just blindly look away. It doesn't mean you have to be scrolling Twitter every day looking for images of people in pain, but it also means that we can't just look away and block out what's going on in the world.

It's the same sort of, you know, don't talk to me about racism, it makes me so sad. No, not okay. Don't talk to me about my country as complicity in genocide. I don't want to think about it.

[27 : 18] We have to engage with it. We have to face it. There's a really fascinating Roman Catholic professor of ethics at Boston College, Father James Keenan, and his definition of sin, I think, is really interesting here because he describes sin as a failure to bother to love.

And that means that if we're called by God's Spirit into this work, our sin is not engaging with the people that we see. Our sin is looking away. Our sin is, the example he uses in fleshing this idea out is the story of the Good Samaritan.

The priest who walked past, the Levite who walked past someone on the side of the road because they didn't bother to love. In the church that I grew up in, we had this, we used one of the, a book of common prayer confessions, and there's a line in it that says, forgive us for the evil we have done.

We can all sort of wrap our heads around. And the good we have not done. God's Spirit gives us this sight of the broken world.

It gives us this sight of the world around us that needs healing. And it calls us into a vocation of doing what Jesus did. Rolling up his sleeves, literally in some cases getting into the mud, and joining God in the renewal of all things.

[28 : 40] But, the renewal of all things is quite a big task. I am told. And if you, if you are anything like me, you can get a little bit overwhelmed by everything.

And we can almost stop because there's too much. The final, sort of the final way that our body engages, the way that our seeking comfort engages in this is not to look away, is not to hope for heaven, but to say, there's just too much.

I can't do it. And so I was actually, I was, I was very encouraged when John did his prayer time this morning because the way that I think we think about how we engage in this is through prayer.

But it's not perhaps our Western understanding of prayer where, you know, we pray for world peace before we go out to work for Biden, Boeing, Genocide, .net. It's a call to this deep prayerfulness. It's a call to not actually speaking words. Paul literally tells us in this passage that we don't know the words to pray, but instead it's the prayer, the exercise that John have led us through, listening to the Spirit, listening to the Spirit, interceding on our behalf.

[30 : 02] I want to be really careful not to over-spiritualize this because we can, we can take this too far too. But I think when we take that time, when we sit and we listen to the groanings of the Spirit on our behalf, we start to hear something and we start to see where the Spirit of God is leading our heart.

Maybe, maybe we hear the literal groans of the earth. Maybe the trees speak to us. Maybe the water speaks to us. Maybe we feel called to those in prison.

Maybe we feel called to those who are sick. Maybe to those who are hungry. The Spirit of God joins with our Spirit and intercedes on our behalf.

And as we listen to the Spirit, we start to see where we respond. We start to hear where we are called to be. And I don't want to, again, I don't want to sort of over-spiritualize called, right?

This isn't some, like, destiny on your life. But if, if when you're, when you're engaging with prayer, when you're looking at the world, praying for the world, thinking about where God's Spirit is calling you to, you start to hear, I really am concerned for.

[31 : 19] And that doesn't mean that we're not concerned for something else, right? If our concern is for the sick, that doesn't mean we're not concerned for poverty. Or if our concern is for poverty, it doesn't mean we're not concerned for the environment.

It just means that in this overwhelming task of the renewal of all things, we all have a role to play and to find our place for that. And I also want to stress here that when we're, when we're engaging in this, this sort of prayer, this seeking of how we respond to the call of the Spirit, we cannot just respond to where the pain takes us.

We also have to respond to the hope. We have to respond to what vision, what is the Spirit vision, what is the Spirit hope of what this renewal could look like?

We can do a lot of harm if we look at the world and we say, there is all of this pain and I am drawn to it and I must respond to it. But only drawn and responding to the pain can cause more harm than saying, what is the hope?

What is God's vision for this place? What is my role in bringing about the renewal of this place? And what does renewal look like? And so the reason I don't want to over-spiritualize this is that many of us have sort of done that process.

[32 : 31] We kind of feel drawn to a particular area of the world to address. We know that sort of feeling in our spirit when we see something wrong and how we respond to it. It's not a deeply spiritual, I must sit in silence for weeks to figure out my purpose.

It's a, this is what I feel my spirit urging me to do. This is what I feel called to respond to. So I don't want to, again, over-spiritualize it, but it is also helping us find our place in the body of Christ, as Becky talked about a few weeks ago.

I also really want to caution us against being those DC people who when we hear vocation, call of the spirit, we think, excellent, that is my day job. sometimes our day job might be how we respond to the call of the spirit, but it should probably be more than that.

Jesus wasn't the Messiah nine to five. How do we respond to the call of the spirit across all of our lives, across all facets of how we live? Angela Davis, who's a black feminist and abolitionist, says that you have to act as if it were radically possible to change the world, and you have to do it all the time.

Jesus lived out his identity, his vocation 24-7, and that's what we're called to do too. So I don't want to say that our job can't be a part of this. I also don't want to say that we should throw ourselves into our job 24-7 because that's vocation.

[33 : 59] This is about how are we living our lives following the calling of the spirit, regardless of what it is that we do. So there's these two dichotomies that Paul set up in this passage.

The first, sort of the body and the spirit, this idea of our own comfort versus the call of God. And then at the end, he's talking about the spirit's showing us the pain and the spirit's showing us the hope.

And so as we leave here today, I want to encourage us to think about what is the call of the spirit to live into our inheritance vocation from God. See where our spirits resonates with God's spirit.

I want to caution us not to look away from the world, not to give up, not to throw our hands up, not to hope for some mystical heaven in the future where everything's resolved, but to commit to the renewal of ourselves and find our place in the renewal of the world that God created.

So let's pray. God, thank you that you have given us your spirit, given us your eyes to see the world as you see it, both the pain and the hope.

[35 : 15] And we pray as we walk out of here today that we don't lean into comfort, to ease, to how to secure our own survival, but instead to do the work that you have called us to, to engage in the liberation and the renewal of all things.

Amen.