

The Trouble with Time

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[0 : 00] Today we're reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 3. Starting in verse 1, we read, For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal.

A time to break down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.

A time to seek and a time to lose. A time to keep and a time to cast away. A time to tear and a time to sew.

[1 : 01] A time to keep silence and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Also, he has put eternity into man's heart. Yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.

Also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man. I perceive that whatever God does endures forever.

Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it so that people fear before him. That which is already has been.

[2 : 11] That which is to be already has been. And God seeks what has been driven away. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness.

And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked. For there is a time for every matter and for every work.

I said in my heart, with regard to the children of man, that God is testing them. That they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same.

As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath. And man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place.

All are from the dust. And to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beasts goes down into the earth.

[3 : 20] So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

This is the word of God. Great. Thank you, Karen. Let's pray together as we come and look at this passage.

Heavenly Father, Sovereign God, Merciful Lord, we come before your word this morning because, as we've said many times before, we want to hear you speak.

That's why we gather to encounter you, the living God, through your word, to be encouraged by the gospel, to worship you this morning. God, I pray that you know where each one of our hearts are at. You know those of us that are encouraged and those of us that are discouraged. Those of us that are laughing, those of us that are mourning, those of us that are rejoicing, those of us that are weeping. God, won't you come and meet with each one of us this morning and speak to us from your word.

[4 : 26] Humble us, challenge us, but also encourage us. We pray these things in your wonderful name. Amen. I want to encourage you, if you've got a Bible, to keep it open to Ecclesiastes 3 or otherwise grab the bulletin.

We're going to be looking at this text a fair bit. But time, this passage is all about time and the seasons of our life. Time is the one resource that, my guess is, most of us feel like we don't have enough of it.

When you are young, like the children that have run out, you feel like time is your friend. You've got all the time in the world. But age quickly dispels that.

One person said that time is like a river that only runs in one direction. And there's coming a time when time will run out. Unlike money, you can save all the time in the world, but you can never leave it to your children.

You can't bequeath it in your will and have a building named after you. So-and-so left this amount of time to this foundation. No matter how much time you save, all of us will come to a point where the sand in the hourglass of our lives eventually runs out.

[5 : 42] But time is not only a limited and finite resource, it's also meant to be a source of wisdom. How we view time and how we steward our time and the seasons of our lives shape our lives profoundly.

Now, we're looking at this book, Ecclesiastes, and Nielsen, the last two weeks, has opened that up looking at chapter one or two. And I wanted just to remind us of the framework, in case you weren't here the last few weeks or maybe you missed it.

Ecclesiastes is actually written, there's two authors, there's two voices in the book. Most of the book is the words of this guy called the teacher or the preacher.

In Hebrew, the word is kohelet, which means one who gathers people together. And most of the book is the words of kohelet, the teacher or the preacher. But the book itself is actually written by another author, another wise man.

And he employs the words or uses the words of kohelet to show us what life looks like if all you see is the world around you.

[6 : 52] Kohelet is aware of God. He knows God is there, but it's almost like God is in the distance. He's not aware of God involved in his life and breaking into his life and the mercy and the grace of God.

He's aware that there is a God, but his life is consumed with what he can see. I don't know if you actually see throughout this passage, look at how many times he says, I saw, I perceived, I see. He's describing the world as he sees it in front of him. And the author is using the words of this teacher to say, if you see life like that, all that's in front of you, it's going to end in a dead end.

What is the teacher's favorite phrase? His conclusion, his assessment? Meaningless. Vanity. The Hebrew is the word hevel, which means a vapor or a mist.

It's like trying to grab some smoke with your hand, and you open up and you see it's disappeared. Meaningless vanity. And the point of Ecclesiastes is to help us lift our eyes off of just the here and now and to see there is more to life than what we can just see.

[8 : 04] And so the author is using the words of the teacher, Kohelet, to help us do that. That's important to understand when we read Ecclesiastes. And so far, the author or the teacher has explored the kind of circular nature of life.

He says in chapter 1, What has been will be again. And what has been will be done. Nothing is new under the sun. In chapter 2, he explored pleasure and hedonism.

Education and wisdom. Toil and work. And what is his assessment? Vanity. Hevel. Hevel. Hevel. Striving after the wind.

Well, today we come to chapter 3. And the teacher, Kohelet, wants to explore the idea of time and the seasons of our lives. And what the author is going to say to us in this chapter is that in order to live well, we need to understand two things.

Firstly, our lives are enclosed within time's bounds. Our lives are enclosed within time's bounds.

[9 : 12] But secondly, God is not. Okay? That's the big idea. And we're going to look at this in four sections. And so look at the first section with me. Verses 1 to 8.

The tapestry of life. The tapestry of life. Let's read this famous poem again. The author writes, For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal.

A time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance.

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek, and a time to lose.

[10:17] A time to keep, and a time to cast away. A time to tear, and a time to sow. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

A time for love, and a time for hate. A time for war, and a time for peace. This poem, the author beautifully explores that life is like a tapestry.

Do you know what a tapestry is? Tapestry is one of those beautifully embroidered pictures that is made up of hundreds or even millions of strands of material.

Sometimes silk, sometimes other material. And the embroiderers will sew it together, and make a beautiful picture out of it. And the author is saying that life is like this.

It consists of hundreds, thousands of moments of times, and seasons of our lives that make up the tapestry of our lives. If you live long enough, your life will experience the full spectrum of the experiences of what it means to be human.

[11:26] Joys and challenges, delights and disappointments, sunny days and autumn nights. A time of sowing and reaping, of building up and breaking down.

And the teacher is not arguing that this is how life ought to be. There's no moral injunction here. He's not saying there is a time where you should love your kids, and you should hate your kids, or love people, or hate people.

This is not an ought to be. He's describing how life is as he sees it, as he perceives it. He is saying that life is not just sunny days, and drinking pina colodas, and filled with laughter and embracing.

Life is complex. It's messy. There's hard times. There's good times. There's in-between times.

Someone said, In prosperity, prepare for suffering. In suffering, know that it won't always be so.

Life is complex. It's full of the vast spectrum. In everything, there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven. Life, says the teacher, is a tapestry, and the wise person knows how to respond in the different seasons of life appropriately.

[12:39] There's this very confusing two verses in the book of Proverbs, in chapter 26. It says this, Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

And then the next line says, Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

And think what's going on here. So I've got this fool in front of me.

Do I speak to him or do I not speak to him? What do I do? Well, different situations will require a different response. Sometimes the best thing to do is just to walk away. But sometimes you've got to engage and don't leave him in his folly.

The wise person knows that life is not linear. It's not simplistic. It's not just simply axiomatic. You read a verse like this and you say, Okay, I know how life works. Life is complex.

It's full of these complexities in life. It is a tapestry, a patchwork of joy and grief, rejoicing and mourning. Life is like a song that has major notes and minor notes as well.

[13:42] It is a tapestry that has reds and blues and greens, but it also has blacks and browns and grays. Life sometimes has beginner doctors that poke you in the wrong place.

And sometimes it has experienced doctors that know exactly what you need. Thank you, Alan, for that piece of insight. Life consists of seasons of diapers and pacifiers, sleepless nights, but also seasons of getting old and false teeth and dentures and losing your memory.

Life is like a tapestry. But notice how most of these things are beyond your control or your ability to influence. Many of these things that are described in this poem sometimes come crashing into your life unannounced.

But all of these things are really beyond our ability to control them. And actually one of the marks of foolishness is to think that we have complete control over our lives.

Anybody here plan your birth? Anybody know exactly how or when you will die? The author is telling us that life is sometimes beyond our control.

[14:57] The author, David Gibson, wrote a fascinating book called Living Life Backwards on the book of Ecclesiastes. I encourage you to read it if you can order it. And look at what he says. He says that while we may be tempted to look at this list in the poem like a food panda menu and think

I will order three hours of joy today, four hours of rest, and 25 minutes of suffering next week, and then I will have two and a half years of fulfilling wonderful work before I go on to the next season.

Life doesn't always work out like that. We may think we are the captains of our fate, the masters of our destiny, but really step back a little and you'll see the tapestry of your life is largely out of your hands, beyond your control to influence or ability.

And so wisdom is not measured by the success of your life, but whether we know how to turn to God in each and every season of life. For every season, for everything there is a season, a time under heaven, the tapestry of lives.

But notice, secondly, the tyranny of our lives. This poem in Ecclesiastes 3 is very famous. It's often read at weddings and funerals, even funerals of those that are secular or humanistic.

It's a very famous poem because it's written so beautifully. If you happen to be of a certain age and you happen to listen to pop music in the 1970s, there was a band called The Birds.

[16:33] Does anybody know what I'm referring to? Okay, Oscar. Wow. Great. Thank you for that confession. They wrote a very famous song. There is a season, turn, turn, turn.

Does anyone know that? Okay, Colin, I see that little nod. This song, this poem, is beautiful. It captures the experience, the spectrum of our lives.

And the way that it's written, it kind of lilts, right? It sings. It's got this melody to it. For everything, there is a season. A season to plant, and a season to pluck up.

A season to gather, and a season to cast away. It's just written so beautifully, you can't help but want to sing it. But the author is not singing this because he's celebrating the tapestry of life.

If anything, the teacher is frustrated by the tapestry of life. For the teacher, he's saying that life with all its dimensions is a mystery.

[17:35] It's an enigma. Sometimes there's joy, and dancing, and laughter, but oftentimes there's pain, there's tears, there's mourning, there's heartache. As reciprocal, and as melodic as the poem is, that's not how life always works.

It's not simply this linear, this simplistic. Life is sometimes nonsensical. It's a tapestry, sure, but he's saying, all I can see is the back of the tapestry, and I can see just messy strands.

There's a whole lot of material that just looks like it's all over the place. Sometimes it seems like the tapestry of life is coming apart at the seams. Have you ever heard that phrase, whenever God closes a door, he opens a window?

Sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes he just smashes the door in your face and expects you to wait. And waiting is good, but waiting is hard, right?

Look at verse 9 with me. Verse 9 to 15. Look at what he says. He says, he writes about this beautiful poem, there's a time for love, and for peace, and hate, and war, etc.

[18:42] Verse 9, That's a familiar phrase in Ecclesiastes, right? What gain is there from all the seasons of life? Maybe you're in a season of toil, and you work, and you work, and you work, but it's a season of loss for you.

It all comes to nothing. Maybe you work, and you work, and you work, and you achieve something beautiful, but who knows whether the season to follow is a season of loss, and it all just falls apart. Even the joys in this life are stamped with time, are bound by time, and will eventually vanish with time.

What's the point, he asks. Look at verse 10. He says, I have seen the business, that means the cares and the concerns, that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Okay, well that sounds positive. Verse 11, He has put eternity into man's heart. Well that sounds wonderful.

[19:45] But man cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. The teacher is saying, these seasons are frustrating, because they are frustratingly mysterious.

The teacher says, sometimes life is like a 10,000 piece puzzle, and God has hidden the box from you. And all you've got is your puzzle piece, and you don't know where it goes.

And what comes next? Sure, from a perspective of eternity, the puzzle piece looks beautiful. God has made everything beautiful in its time. But the problem is, I'm not God.

I can't see from the perspective of eternity. Daniel Estes says, humans are bound by time, but we are wired for eternity.

But we are wired for eternity. We intuitively know there must be meaning somewhere. And we are made for more than vain toil. And this is the wrestle that the teacher, Kohelet, is wrestling with.

[20 : 43] He's saying, I know there's something more than this. I know that there's a God out there. Surely life is more than just the sum of my years, and then I die. There is a consciousness that He's put in my mind.

There's a consciousness in my heart. I was made for more than this. But I can't figure it out. God has put a veil over my eyes, and hidden from me, the seasons, and the times.

Sometimes it seems like it's the season to mourn, followed by the season of weeping, followed by the season of breaking down, and the season of burying.

And unlike the four seasons of the weather, they are not always as predictable. And so what does Kohelet, the teacher, tell us to do? Well, look at verse 12.

He comes back to his Carpe Diem passage. He says, I perceive, now look around me, I perceive there's nothing better than for mankind to be joyful and to do good as long as he lives.

[21 : 45] Also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil. This is God's gift to man. He's saying, when you can't see what's going on, the best thing you can do is work hard, enjoy life, do as much good as you can to those around you.

Don't waste your life. But enjoy what you've got now. That's where he lands. The tyranny, the frustration of this life.

But the teacher isn't finished there. There's actually another element that is frustrating to him. Because this frustration is compounded further when he experiences the injustice of life.

There is a season for everything under the sun, says the teacher. But he's struggling because it seems to him that more often than not, it's the season for injustice rather than justice.

Life is like a set of scales, he says. And it seems like somebody is pressing down on the scale of injustice. Look at verse 16 to 22.

[22 : 50] He says, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness. And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

Now he doesn't say it, but he's talking about the law courts. This is not a commentary on contemporary times. He's saying in ancient Israel. The one place in ancient Israel you expected there to be justice and righteousness was to go to the courts.

At least there they would uphold things. But even there I saw injustice. Verse 17. In my heart I said, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. He's saying, surely if life works out the way it's meant to be, God will put all things in order. But I perceived that that was not the case. As he looks around, all he can see is the brokenness and the injustice of the world.

He's saying, where is the time for justice? I know there's a time for everything, but I can't see it. God, we've had this season of injustice long enough. When will the right time come?

[23 : 57] Friends, maybe you feel like that. You read the news. You read what's happening in Ukraine. You read other bits of news. You see politicians just using and abusing their citizens for themselves.

Nations languishing in poverty while the kings and royalty and politicians get richer and richer. Maybe you read the news and your heart stirs and you get angry. You think, God, where is the justice?

When is anything going to get put right? Where is the season for justice? Look at verse 18. He says, He's talking about jungle justice.

Do you know that phrase? I don't know if that is a familiar phrase. Jungle justice? How is justice in the jungle lived out? How do things operate in the jungle? The strong eat the weak.

The powerful trample the feeble. Right? Eat or be eaten. That's the way it works in the jungle. And he's saying, God, it seems like jungle justice is at work in Israel.

[25 : 20] The powerful just eat the feeble. The strong are consuming the weak. He's saying, God, where is it? It seems like there's no difference between us and the animals.

God has put eternity in our hearts. There's a longing for more. We know this isn't how the world should be. But unless God somehow reveals himself to us, unless God comes and shows us that there's another way, unless God comes and removes the veil from our hearts and reveals to us eternity, unless God gives us a glimpse of eternity, all we're going to have is left to ourselves. And left to ourselves, are we any better than the beasts? All we have is a striving. There's a longing for more, but all that ends in vanity.

Maybe we're no better than the beasts, he says. God, unless you come and show us there must be more, what's the difference between us and the animals? All are from dust and to dust return. Who knows, he says, whether the spirit of man goes up and the spirit of beasts goes down. I saw that there's nothing better than a man should rejoice in his work, for this is his lot.

[26 : 38] Who can bring him to see what will be after him? The teacher is grappling with, as he looks at the world around him, a life is a tapestry.

It's full of lots of seasons. But the seasons don't always make sense. Sometimes it seems like there's more the season of brokenness than the season of healing. The season of destroying than the season of wholeness.

And so really, this is the question. Who can bring to mankind to see what will be after this life? The teacher says that for many of us, sometimes the story of life is, life is hard and then you die.

Okay, that's God's words. We'll see you next week. Well, is there any hope? Does Ecclesiastes offer us any hope?

If life is a 10,000 piece puzzle, sometimes it seems like God has hidden the picture. If life is a tapestry, sometimes it seems like the threads are coming apart.

[27 : 45] If life is like a set of scales, sometimes it seems the scales are stacked against us. So is there any hope? Well, remember, the book of Ecclesiastes has these two authors, the voice of Koheleth and the voice of the author.

And if you go to the very end of Ecclesiastes chapter 12, the author steps back onto the scene and he says, you've heard the words of Koheleth. And he says this in verse 11, the words of the wise man are like goads.

Do you know what a goad is? A goad is a short stick that a farmer or a shepherd uses. It's got a point on the end and he uses it to coroll or to provoke the animals to go where he wants them to go. He says the words of the wise man or the teacher are like goads. He's using them to provoke us, to get us to think. And what is the author wanting us to see? What's his provocation to us?

Well, the author of Ecclesiastes wants us to see that God has put eternity in our hearts. He's put a longing in our hearts for more than just this world. For a world where there will be justice.

[28 : 56] A world where there will be no more tears, no more death, no more war, no more agony. But unlike the beasts, he hasn't left us to ourselves to figure it out.

Because God has revealed himself. God has come and shown us that there's a different way. God hasn't left us to ourselves but has come to remove the veil from our hearts to give us a glimpse of eternity.

How has God done this? By sending the eternal one, the one who is not bound by time, who is not limited by time, who has stepped into our time-bound world, and our world frustrated by the brokenness of this world, he has come to us.

Do you remember one of the teacher's favorite phrases to describe the world around us? He says, life under the sun, or life under heaven.

We said in verse 16, he says, I saw that life under the sun. But friends, what happens if somebody comes to us from beyond the sun and steps into our broken world?

[30 : 06] One who will bring us life, one who is not bound by time, stamped by time, corroded by time, or vanished by time. What happens if one will come to us from beyond the sun, who will help us, one who sees the tapestry and will give wisdom because he sees the bigger picture and he knows the beginning from the end.

What happens if one steps to us, comes to us from beyond the sun, one who will weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who rejoice, one who promises resurrection life to those who weep and mourn in this life?

Friends, what happens if one comes to us from beyond the sun and steps into our time-bound, frustrated world, and who will rule with justice and righteousness and bring peace to our frustrated world?

See, look at the very last sentence of chapter 3. I don't know if you picked it up. He says, who can bring to him to see what will be after this life?

That's a great question. Who can tell us what will happen beyond the grave? The teacher says, maybe life is hard and then you die. That's probably not the case for many of us.

[31 : 23] Most of us here live very privileged lives. But for most of the world, that's life. Life sucks and then you die. who can bring to man to see what will be after him?

Where will we find one who perfectly knows all things and is wise enough to see the bigger picture and to know how it ends? Where will we find one who is wise enough and yet gentle enough and humble enough to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn?

And yet at the same time, is sovereign enough and powerful enough and glorious enough to overturn the brokenness of this world and bring righteousness and justice into our hearts and into this world and hope for all eternity?

Where will we find one like that? Well, if you've been coming to this church for any length of time, you'll know his name is Jesus. Jesus Christ who existed for all eternity past and who spoke time and space and matter into existence, climbed into our time-bound world, inhabited the brokenness of this world, frustrated by the injustice and the sin of this world, in order to liberate us from the tyranny of this time-bound world and bring us into an eternal world, a world that is not bound by time or frustrated by time or wrecked by the ravages of time into a world that will never perish or spoil or fade.

That phrase comes from 1 Peter chapter 1 where he says, We have been born again into a living hope. We have been promised an inheritance that will never perish or spoil or fade.

[33 : 12] Friends, even the very best things in this life are subject to decay and to vanish with time. But Jesus promises us a hope, a treasure, an inheritance that is beyond the corrosion of time, that will never vanish with time, that cannot perish, spoil or fade.

Friends, if all you have is reincarnation, then you're stuck in the cycle of life, the cycle of futility, the cycle of meaninglessness. For the teacher, all he has is verse 2.

There is a time to be born and a time to die. But Jesus Christ comes and promises that if you know him, if you are found in him, if you will come to him and have your life found in him, there is a time to be born and there is a time to die, but there is also a time to rise again in glory and to never die.

Friends, Jesus Christ solves time's riddle. He dismantles time's limitations. He enters into the frustration of this time-bound world and he achieves a salvation for us that will last long beyond the ravages of time.

But how did Jesus do that? Well, look again at our poem in verses 1 to 8. Jesus took upon himself the very worst parts of this broken world, the very worst parts of human nature, in order to secure for us a perfect world to come.

[34 : 46] Jesus Christ died so that we can live. Friends, Jesus Christ wept so that one day our tears will be wiped away. Jesus Christ was shunned so that we can be embraced.

Jesus Christ lost all so that we can gain all. Jesus was forsaken so that we can be chosen. Jesus was hated so that we can be loved.

Jesus was judged so that we can be vindicated. Friends, at his trial Jesus Christ kept silent so that we can rejoice and sing.

Jesus was killed on Calvary on that cross so that we can have peace with God in this life and for all eternity. Jesus Christ rose again so that those who are in Christ can rise with him and be seated with him in glory for all eternity.

Friends, life is made up of seasons diverse and unpredictable some of them wonderful many of them bewildering and frustrating. So how will we respond?

[35 : 58] Christ came to us from outside of time and into our world and invites us now to invite him into our lives and to respond. Only in Christ can we have the consistent hope that is not bound by this world that will free us in this lifetime and will last for all eternity.

A hope which promises us life in this world and forever. Friends, this week as you go to work, as you go to university, as you go to high school, as you look after your children, as you do your taxes and as you look after your parents, don't set your hope on a perfectly ordered world.

In this life it may not come. Set your hope on Jesus who will perfectly guide you through the complexities of this life and will ultimately lead you home.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus Christ, this, your word is a rich treasure and you remind us God this morning that life is complex, it's diverse, it's wonderful, it's sometimes frustrating.

But God, only in you can we find the consistent hope that is not bound by the fallenness of this world. A hope that will enter into our lives now and last for all eternity.

[37 : 19] Jesus, I pray, won't you help all of us here this morning to set our hope on you. For those of us that are not Christians, God, won't you remove the veil from our eyes.

May we see you and freshly find our hope in you. For those of us Christ that are Christians, we pray that you will help us this week, tomorrow, and Wednesday, and Thursday, and Friday, this week God, that we will set our hope on you.

That in the seasons that are bewildering and frustrating, when life seems like you've hidden the box from us, God, may we set our hope on you. Jesus, we pray, come and help us by your spirit and by your grace.

Friends, maybe you, I want to give you just a chance to respond. I want to ask you, why don't you take a time just to freshly invite Christ to come and be the center of your life?

If you're a Christian, you've done this many times in your life, why don't you freshly today come and invite Christ to be the center of your life and to lead you through the complexities and the challenges and the seasons of life?

[38 : 30] Maybe you're here this morning and you're not a Christian. Jesus doesn't promise to solve everything in life. He doesn't take away all the difficulties, but He does promise to come and enter into your life and to be that consistent hope.

Why don't you this morning invite Him to come and be your Lord and your King and your Master? Why don't you freshly hand over your life to Him as well? Christ, come and have your way in our lives, we pray.

In our joys and in our struggles, in our fears and our anxieties, in our celebrations, in our laughter and our mourning, Christ, come and be central.

Come and be our Lord. Come and be our King. Come and be our Master. Come and help us to follow You and trust You, we pray. Amen.

Amen.