

Revelation 19:11-20:15 // The Last Battle

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[0 : 00] Hiya, so this evening's reading is from the book of Revelation, chapter 19, beginning at verse 11, which can be found on page 1248 of the Church Bibles.

So that's page 1428, Revelation chapter 19, beginning at verse 11. I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True.

With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

[1 : 20] On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals and the mighty, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small.

Then I saw the beasts and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army.

But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshipped its image.

The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the abyss, and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient snake who is the devil or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

[2 : 57] He threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be set free for a short time.

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God.

They had not worshipped the beast or its image, and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection.

The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison, and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, and to gather them for battle.

[4 : 19] In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth, and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves.

But fire came down from heaven and devoured them, and the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown.

They will be tormented, day and night, forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne, and him who was seated on it.

The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.

[5 : 30] Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Thanks be to God for his word. Well, good evening.

If we've not met, I'm Martin Ayersley, pastor here, and thanks Jack for reading that so helpfully for us. If you could keep your Bibles open, where we were looking at that together, page 1248, that would be a great help.

And you can find an outline in the notice sheet as we look at this portion of God's word. So you may find that helpful. Let's pray as we look at this together. Let's ask for God's help.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, for your promise that all who read your words in this book, Revelation, and take them to heart are blessed.

[6 : 28] And so we long for that blessing, Heavenly Father. We ask that you will help each one of us to have ears to hear, and we will indeed take this prophecy to heart and we will be blessed.

For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Well, we've been in this series in Revelation. It's challenging and so good for us. One of the things that I said a few weeks ago is what we think will happen in the future shapes how we live in the present.

A few weeks ago, I watched the movie All Quiet on the Western Front, which I'm sure some of you will have seen. It's based on an autobiography by a German soldier about his experiences in the First World War.

And the opening scene in All Quiet on the Western Front shows Paul, the main character, in the horror of trench warfare.

And he comes out of the trenches with a row of fellow soldiers and machine gun fire rains down on them and they're kind of crawling through mud.

[7 : 35] Friends are getting killed next to him and it's just, it's absolutely horrific. And then the next thing that happens in the movie is it winds the tape back, it flashes back and picks up the story earlier in his life.

And so you see Paul in Germany growing up in a charming German village. Paul with his patriotic teachers who lead the whole class of his friends to sign up for the German army, assured of victory and assured of honor.

And it strikes you in the movie how enthusiastic they are and how full of self-confidence they are as they sign up to go out to fight. They think the war's going to be a triumph.

And you think to yourself, if only he'd seen what we've already seen in the movie. Or, thinking back at history, if only someone could have shown them a cinema reel in Germany in 1913, 1914, in these places where young men were signing up for the war.

If only someone could have just shown them the carnage that was going to hit them in the trenches of France. Friends mowed down, lives lost to gain meagre pieces of land that within weeks were handed back.

[8 : 48] And then Germany surrendering, humiliated. If you know the future, you can make better decisions in the present. So tonight couldn't be more important for us because what God does for us in these chapters of Revelation is he's revealing for us the future.

And it's a revelation we couldn't know unless he tells us what's going to happen. This section of Revelation is the tale of two cities. Last week we spent time with one city that was symbolic of the world that we live in now.

It's the city of Babylon. And it stands for Human Greatness in Defiance of the Living God. That's all around us today. The world we see, humanity, doing great things, but forgetting God, ignoring God, defying God.

And God delivers the verdict in the last section of Revelation that we saw that Babylon is doomed. Babylon is going to fall. It will be judged by God for rejecting him. And the future for our world is a glorious second city that's coming, that's called in Revelation the New Jerusalem.

And we're going to see that in the coming weeks and we're going to enjoy it. I'm hoping that in the next few weeks, as we look at that, it will be like watching the best kind of travel program you could imagine, where you're watching it and you're like, let's just pack our bags.

[10:12] That's where we want to be. That's what Revelation does to us at the end. We want to be in that New Jerusalem. And yet in between these two cities, these accounts of two cities, we have to have this section that we're in tonight of great conflict.

As the Lord reveals for us, in order for our world to get from where it is today with all its idolatry and injustice, to where God will make it pure and full of joy, we have to have this conflict.

John gives us tonight four different portraits of that coming conflict. And we've already seen that Revelation is like that. It's full of action replays. So on Wednesday night last week, Celtic played Bayern Munich.

And if you're a Celtic fan, you can watch Celtic's goal in that game online from all the angles. You can relive it from all different angles to show the goal Celtic scored against Bayern Munich.

And if you're a Rangers fan, you can watch Harry Kane's winning goal from last Wednesday night from all the different angles. And you can relive what for you would be the joy of Bayern Munich's goal that night.

[11:24] Well, what happens in Revelation is that God gives us lots of replays of the same events from different angles, each time impressing on us something different.

And the first portrait we get tonight is the portrait of a coming warrior. Have a look with me again at verse 11. Verse 11. Chapter 19.

I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True.

Now his white horse is a picture of his goodness and victory as well. This rider is called Faithful and True because the judgment that he is riding out from heaven to earth to enact makes God faithful to his promises and true to his word.

And he is righteous, so the next sentence, with justice he judges and wages war. And John has seen some glorious angels that he's told us about in Revelation, but this is clearly the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:35] His eyes are like blazing fire, so glory is radiating out from him, and he looks on the world with purity, able to discern and judge.

And he's crowned with many crowns. He has all authority from God. And then verse 12, he has a name written on him that no one knows but himself. Probably just indicating there for us.

I mean, you can find lots of guesses as to what that name would be, but I think the point is we don't know because we can't, there are things about Jesus that we can't know.

We can just see what we can see, that he is unimaginably glorious. He is beyond our understanding. And then we hear from John that what he sees is that his robe is bloodstained.

And yet this is before the battle. It's before the judgment has come. And so for my money, I wonder if this is his own blood on his robe, the blood of the cross that he's shed, and now he's riding out from heaven, having borne judgment for his people, he comes to bring judgment on others.

[13:47] And behind him are the armies of heaven on their own white horses. And it could be angels, but it's striking that they're wearing fine linen, white and clean. That sounds from Revelation as though this is his people.

Those who've been faithful to him now get to ride out with him, and he leads them back to the world that he's going to purify. We follow him into victory.

And he's come, Revelation makes clear, to fulfill some great Old Testament prophecies about God's forever king. Isaiah 63 talked about how God's forever king will come and tread the winepress of God's judgment as enemies of God and God's people are judged.

And Psalm 2, which was this great coronation psalm about this Messiah, this appointed king of God, is quoted here because this is God's forever king coming to bring an end to rebellion against God in God's world.

And in verse 16, his robe has his name, that this is the king of kings and lord of lords. It's a magnificent picture. And it's worth asking ourselves, helpfully, do we know this Jesus?

[15:01] When we think about Jesus, is there room in our picture of Jesus, the Jesus who has saved us, to see that this is him as he is and as he will be? When we see evil in our world on the news, or we've experienced evil or affliction in our lives, do we see Jesus as he is here and set our

hope on him?

He is the conquering warrior, now risen, ascended, glorified. Picture him on that great white war horse, pacing up and down in front of his cavalry, waiting for the signal, waiting for the gates of heaven to open, and on that day he will ride out towards the world in majesty.

Only a man of this power and might could really save the world. Last week, up in verse 9 of this chapter, we were told about our future being the wedding supper of the Lamb.

And we've seen Jesus again and again described by John in Revelation as the Lamb. And we need Jesus to be, to have the qualities of the Lamb who was slain to save the world.

He's come to take away our sin, he's compassionate, he's gracious, he welcomes us when we come and take refuge in him. But he also needs to be this different side, a warrior, higher than every king, higher than every angel, the sustainer of creation.

[16:36] He made it, he sustains it, and he will collect it at the end for himself. And we see here in this picture, his majesty is overwhelming, his righteousness is immense, and no one can resist him.

So that's our first portrait, the portrait of a coming warrior, so that you can set your hope on him for the future. And then John takes us to the last battle.

We see this in two different sections in our Bible passage, but for my money, as we'll see as we look at it, it's the same scene being described twice. The portrait of the last battle, his enemies will come to a grisly end.

Now this is a battle we've been waiting for in Revelation. In chapter 16, everyone who stands against God gathered at a place called Armageddon, and that is the symbolic place for the last battle.

And we don't know what happened there. We've been on pause with some reruns, and now here in verse 17, a glorious angel calls the birds together and says, come, gather together for the great supper of God.

[17:47] And for a moment you might be thinking, oh, it's the wedding, the wedding we were hearing about. And then he says, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and the mighty of horses, and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small.

And that is gruesome, isn't it? That is a gruesome picture. A different kind of supper, not the wedding supper of the Lamb. We're seeing here, those who don't go to that feast, they get served up on the last day in this grisly feast.

Who are these enemies of God? Well, in chapters 13 and 15, we met a false trinity. God is the true trinity, three persons in one God, and people are deceived in the world by what's described in Revelation as a false trinity.

There is the evil one himself, Satan, the prince of demons, he's the dragon. And then there are his agents of his demonic work that were described in Revelation as the beast and the false prophet. And here, two of that false trinity, the beast and the false prophet, have come out for battle. But the twist is, there is no battle.

[19:08] We're expecting a battle and there isn't one. It's all so simple in the end. Verse 20, but the beast was captured and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf.

With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshipped its image. So that's anyone who hasn't turned to Jesus is being described there. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse. And all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. So Jesus, this rider, he condemns those who stand against God with his word, the sword from his mouth, and it's all over without a fight.

Why? So that we are, what the impression for us of this vision is we are not to think that the cosmic battle between good and evil is going to be a close run thing.

There's no contest between the good God and the powers of evil. even though all human power that stands against God is on the side of that beast and the false prophet.

[20:25] In the second account of this, which starts in verse 7 of chapter 20, we just look down. Again, a great army gathers for battle against God, but look at verse 9. They marched across the breadth of the earth.

They surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves, but fire came down from heaven and devoured them. Again, this is an Old Testament picture. fire from heaven to judge.

What we're seeing here is that those first two spiritual enemies of God, the false prophet and the beast, are joined by the third, verse 10, the devil, who is thrown into that same lake of burning sulfur where they've been thrown.

It says at the end of verse 10, they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever. Now, the birds eating the flesh, that is gruesome, isn't it?

But the Old Testament, as ever, is our key to understanding revelation, and here it is the prophet Ezekiel, who had these prophetic pictures to describe the end for God's enemies, and he described it like this, as the birds eating them, partly because a great fear in the ancient world was to die and not to be buried.

[21 : 42] It was kind of the greatest sign of defeat, that you weren't even buried when you died. And so it's this picture of a terrible fall. I think it's also a picture because it's wild beasts, typically, who would be eaten by vultures in the wilderness of the world.

God. And I think that's something, there's something there of this is a dimension of human sin, that whenever we sin, sin is dehumanizing.

And that's true in the life of a Christian, that as we fall into sin, there is something that dehumanizes us as we sin. And ultimately, if that's the direction of our lives, if we choose to live our lives away from God, we cut ourselves off from the dignity of being royalty in God's eyes, made in the image of God, valued by God in that kind of way.

And so what's being described here is that ultimately, we end up, it ends very badly. It ends with this sense of that humanness taken away.

But for all who take refuge in Jesus, who head forward to the new creation, what this also means, this picture of the last battle, is none of us will ever need to worry that it might go wrong again.

[23 : 06] So some of us might have been there in the new creation thinking, or we might think now, I wonder if we'd be in the new creation and think, I hope no one spoils this again. You know, the Garden of Eden was very special, but people spoil it.

They listened to the serpent. That could never happen again in the new creation because the evil one will be finished forever. His influence will have gone.

He's in the lake of fire and we'll not need to worry. Nothing can spoil God's plan for this world when it's renewed. So Revelation is saying to us, stick with Jesus, keep going.

Even if it's tough, endure it to stay with him. We must persevere. We asked last week, what aspect of Babylon does your heart find most alluring?

What in the world do you most love that might become a rival to Jesus in your life? And God says, come out from there. Or the language of Hebrews 12 talks about let's throw off the sin that so easily tangles us up so that we can run with perseverance the race mapped out for us.

[24 : 17] So that's our second portrait. Both of them so far have been about the future. The rider on his white horse and this last battle. But our third portrait brings us into our present times as they relate to that future.

What the Bible calls the last days, the times we live in. That's our third point. The portrait of a defeated enemy, his faithful witnesses reigning as priests.

Now, verses 1 to 6 of chapter 20 of Revelation are understood in different ways. And the different views have caused division over church history.

And around the world today, especially in the evangelical church in North America, these verses are a very hot topic. Some of you might never even have come across them, and that's fine.

But others of you will be onto this and kind of, oh, I wonder what he's going to say about the thousand years. So, it's all about when do the thousand years take place?

[25 : 22] They're mentioned here six times. Have you noticed they're in each verse from verse 2 to verse 7? And we could call it the millennium, the thousand years. What do we know about it? Well, from these verses, just a heads up, let's remember there are only six of them, and these are the only mention of the millennium in the whole of the New Testament.

So, as you work out what you think it means, I would be slow to build a whole new understanding of something based on six verses here, if it's something that we can't see well supported by other parts of the Bible.

Then, looking at these verses, we can see that during the millennium, Satan is bound, verse 3. His power is limited. And then, he is set free for a short time.

So that, in verse 7, he can gather the nations to battle against Christ. And during that millennium, all of God's people, they're described in verse 4 as, it covers all of God's people, because it says, those who've died for their faith, along with everyone who hasn't followed the beast. So it's all Christians being described there in verse 4. They come to life, and they reign with Jesus. So, what is he on about?

[26 : 43] What is the thousand years? There are three main views, and lots of mini-views within them. One view is to be post-millennial.

These are people who say, if you're a post- millennialist, you say the thousand years is, it doesn't literally mean a thousand, it's symbolic of a long time. And these verses give us hope that there's going to be this age before Jesus comes back where a great majority of the world will become Christians, because Satan is bound and Christians are reigning, and it'll be like this kind of golden age for the church.

A second view of these verses is called pre-millennialism. And usually, that takes John's whole vision here to be ordered chronologically, sequentially.

So, Christ will return, end of chapter 19, the rider on the white horse, and then, rather than bringing judgment day there and then, he will bind Satan up, and then the millennium will begin.

Which, again, could be a thousand years literally, or it could be symbolic of a long time. But what will happen in the millennium, if you're a pre-millennialist, is Christ has come back, and there is then this golden age of resurrected Christians living with Jesus, and at the end of the thousand years, Satan will be released from the abyss, and there'll be this great last battle where Jesus throws his enemies into the lake of fire.

[28 : 25] Those are the, those are two of the views, and they have very trustworthy followers, and in our church family, there will be some of you here tonight, and certainly some who come in the morning, who hold, they land on one of those views for the millennium.

I follow the third view, which is what's called amillennialism, and that is to say that what I think is going on is that in verse one, John rewinds the tape and goes back, and we've got a new action replay, looking at all the thousand years is, is a way of describing the time that we live in now between Jesus' resurrection and his return.

So the millennium is describing this age, and it's showing us that the dragon, Satan, is bound in our times. His power is limited, and faithful Christians, spiritually, we are reigning with Christ now.

Now why do I think that? First, because the accounts of the battles, the one, if you look down at the end of chapter 19, verses 19 to 21, and the one that comes after the thousand years, in verses 7 to 10 of chapter 20, seem to me quite clearly to be about the same battle, because they both allude to Ezekiel very prominently.

So the reference to Gog and Magog in verse 8 of chapter 20 is a symbolic reference to God's enemies straight from Ezekiel, and the birds at the end of chapter 19 are straight from Ezekiel.

[30 : 08] So I think they're describing the same battle, which gives us confidence that John is rewinding the tape here at the beginning of chapter 20. Also, the reason I think this is happening is because this is consistently how John has written Revelation.

He is not concerned about chronological order in Revelation, and we've seen examples of that. when the seven seals were opened, and the seven bowls were emptied earlier in Revelation, we saw that things are described as though they happen one thing after the other, but no one thinks they're happening one after the other in real life.

We've seen that these are just happening simultaneously, but it's a style of writing to talk about things going on. So I think John is doing the same thing here.

At the start of chapter 20, he's shaking the kaleidoscope again, and he's saying, let me show you another perspective on these same events. And if we take that view, then it helps us understand what he means here by the first resurrection and the second resurrection that you heard when Jack read it for us.

If we understand that the first resurrection is referring to how Jesus has already been raised, and when anyone becomes a Christian, we get given a risen life.

[31 : 29] We are spiritually resurrected from the day we put our faith in Jesus. That's the first resurrection, and then we're waiting for the second resurrection, that we're going to have a physical resurrection when Christ returns.

Now, if all of that's right, then the millennium here stands for the age between Jesus' ascension and his return, and it shows us the Holy Spirit wants us to see two things about our times now that we live in, that the dragon is bound and that faithful Christians are reigning.

The dragon is bound in verses 1 to 3. An angel opens an abyss and puts Satan in and binds him. So when it comes to the devil today, we know from Revelation we shouldn't take the devil too lightly.

He is a real enemy. He would love you to give up on being a Christian. Perhaps nothing would give him greater joy than him picking you off, you not being a Christian.

So don't take him too lightly. But in these verses, God is saying, don't make too much of him. Don't let him terrify you into giving up on speaking about Jesus.

[32 : 44] Jesus has called us to make him known, to be faithful witnesses, to speak up, to live out being one of his followers. And he's promised us that through that testimony, he will build his church.

And it's good for us to remember, the devil cannot stop him from building his church. In verse 6, we're told that together we are to be his priests, priests of God as we reign with Jesus.

And I take it that's referring to our role in these times to be evangelists speaking to other people about God and prayerful speaking to God about people.

We stand in the gap as his priests today, drawing people to know Christ. And we mustn't be afraid to do that. We mustn't think, oh, the devil will get me. And we see the church's power, God's power through his church to do that effectively in our world today.

In 1900, the year 1900, there were 9 million Christians in Africa. 9 million. 100 years later, there were 380 million Christians in Africa.

[33 : 58] 20 years after that, there were 658 million Christians in Africa in the year 2020. It's expected that this year, the number will be 760 million Christians in Africa.

So Revelation 20 is saying, take heart and get on with the job. Wouldn't it be wonderful?

Just imagine, what if people were able to give stats that were proportionately something like that in 100 years' time about Scotland? That people had seen in a generation, the re-evangelization of this nation.

I have no promise from God specifically that he'll do that. But I can promise that it will definitely not happen unless you and I are willing to cross the pain barrier and have conversations about Jesus with friends.

Just as our students have very inspiringly been doing this week with their weeks of events at the universities. And God gives us every reason to long to do that with our fourth scene tonight.

[35 : 02] Finally, and more briefly, the portrait of Judgment Day when the books are opened. So we're back in the throne room in verse 11. And John says, then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.

And we get no description of the one on the throne. But clearly, he is unspeakably glorious. We read about the earth and the heavens fled from his presence and there was no place for them.

And then in verse 12, all the dead are raised and the books are opened. Now, these are the books of deeds, the books of works. Books that record everything that you've ever said and everything you've ever done and everything you've ever thought.

And on Judgment Day, verse 13, we read, each person was judged according to what they had done. And the devastating news here is that not a single person measures up to God's standard when their deeds are read out from the book of works.

Your only hope on Judgment Day is that God will not judge you by what's written in the book of works, by your track record, by your life.

[36 : 23] The Bible urges us, do not arrive on Judgment Day relying on what you've got in that book. You will, verse 15, be thrown into a lake of fire.

A symbolic description here of a future so awful, we can't imagine it. If any of us are relying on good works we've done to be right with God, that is where we're heading.

It would be the most disastrous mistake we could ever make. We've got to find a way of not being judged from those books.

And that makes verse 12b the best news we could ever hear. Verse 12b, another book was opened, which is the book of life. And if your name is written in that book, you're taken straight through Judgment Day and out the other side.

You are sailing straight through to chapter 21, verses 1 to 4. A place where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. And you can stay there forever.

[37 : 31] And Jesus puts your name in that book when you come to him for refuge. By his free grace, that is his free offer to any of us. Come to him, he writes your name in the book.

So friends, let this future shape your present. Where we might think there are all sorts of reasons today not to be a Christian. And on that day, all those reasons will look breathtakingly unimportant, won't they?

And all around us today, people are ignorant of this, are they not? I think lots of people, even if they know we go to church, they think, it's your hobby, isn't it?

They think, you must like the community. Maybe you like to sing. Maybe you're a singer. Maybe you like the cake. Maybe you like helping the homeless.

Maybe it's a place for social action. Maybe you needed a crutch for the week in the world. I ran Park Run at Victoria Park yesterday with a few of you.

[38 : 37] And people are running Park Run. And they might look at me and, what do you do? I'm a minister. And they might think, well, you've got your church on a Sunday for a sense of community. But I don't need that because I get my sense of community from Park Run.

And we need to be clearer, don't we, with those we love, of the most awful reality of verse 15 of Revelation 20.

The new creation is going to be so glorious. It's going to be so wonderful. We're going to see that next week and the week after and the week after.

Nothing could improve it and nothing will ever spoil it. But on Judgment Day, Jesus opens up his book of life. And if your name is not down, you're not going in.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you for the Lord Jesus, the Savior of our world.

[39 : 37] That he has the faithfulness and truth, the goodness and the mighty strength to put right everything that is wrong with this world. May he come soon.

And while we wait, may your spirit strengthen us to persevere, to be faithful witnesses. We ask you, Father, earnestly for the salvation of our city, for the salvation of our nation, for the gospel to advance, for many around us to put down their arms and take refuge in your glorious Son.

For his name's sake. Amen. We're going to sing in response to God's word, so Aileen and the band will lead us. Do stand if you're able. Amen.