

## ***A World in Need of Transformation***

Spring Sermon Series on Romans  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
February 14, 2016

**TEXT:** Romans 1:18-32

We continue this morning in our spring sermon series on Romans. We are reading Romans this spring with the question of how we are transformed by the gospel that we find in Romans.

# ROMANS

**"...PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE,  
HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD,  
WHICH IS YOUR SPIRITUAL WORSHIP.  
DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD,  
BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF YOUR MIND,  
THAT BY TESTING YOU MAY DISCERN  
WHAT IS THE WILL OF GOD, WHAT IS  
GOOD AND ACCEPTABLE AND PERFECT."  
ROMANS 12:1-2 SERMON SERIES FEB 7 - MAY 29, 2016**

Romans has as its central theme the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news. This good news changes us. It has changed lives throughout church history up until the present time. As we read through Romans, our goal is to seek this transformation. We have a significant passage this morning: one that helps

us see how the gospel transforms us; it is an invitation to see the world in need of transformation; and it is a profound calling to us this morning. Romans 1:18-32 is Paul's first step in persuading his readers, the original readers whom he had never met, and us this morning as we read and hear and encounter this letter, which is offering to us a compelling portrait of this transforming gospel. The world we see around us in Romans 1 is a world that stands in desperate need of transformation, and that is what we want to see this morning in this passage. Romans 1:18-32 gives us three descents, if you will, of humanity, and we want to follow these. We see that our descent, our falling away from God brings us into a place of ruin. Yet there is an invitation in the end to see the world at this stage, that is maybe the most challenging aspect or application of this text. There is much to cover, so keep your Bible open to Romans 1 as we look at the plight of humanity.

Romans 1:18 begins with a very small word that we might miss. It says "For . . .":

*"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."*

It is very important at the beginning that we see that Romans 1:18 grounds Paul's eagerness to share the gospel. Paul's desire to communicate this good news is grounded in the reality that humanity is under God's wrath. He says that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.

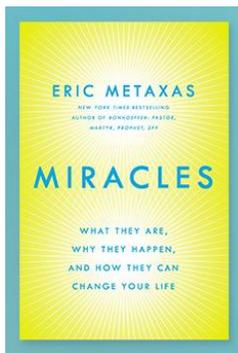
Notice first of all that God's wrath, His righteous judgment, moves against humanity. The greatest evil of humanity is their ungodliness. The Greek word that Paul uses here describes a life that lacks devotion, piety, and worship. So really, the greatest moral evil in the universe that we need to see right at the beginning is a lack of worship. When you think of behavior that is offensive or troubling, Paul says that God's wrath is stirred by our failure to worship. It is not ungodliness in terms of conduct, but it is a lack of reverence and worship towards God. Our lack of reverence and worship for God inevitably manifests itself in unrighteous conduct towards one another, just as Jesus summarized the will of the of God as loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor. Those things go together, so when you don't worship God, you end up exploiting, abusing, and mistreating those around you. Paul says that God's wrath is against humanity in this way because what can be known about God is obvious, it's plain, its manifest, and God has shown it to them. Romans 1:20 he explains this in more detail:

*"For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."*

The first step of humanity's fall is that the knowledge of God is available, that God can be perceived in what's around us.

Richard Swenson, medical doctor, wrote a very wonderful short book called: *More Than Meets the Eye*. In it, he describes some of the things that he notices in the world around us on a very large, broad universal level, but as a physician, his mind is captured by some of the small things. He wrote a whole chapter about the human eye, for example. He says:

"The human eye can distinguish millions of shades of color. On a clear, dark night, human eyes can sense a small candle flame 30 miles away. The human eye blinks automatically every two to ten seconds. In a lifetime, we blink 400 million times. The cornea has such extraordinary sensitivity to touch that anesthesiologists test the corneal reflex to assess the depth of anesthesia prior to general surgery. Just one nerve cell in the retina requires the solution of about 500 simultaneous nonlinear differential equations."



If you understood that last sentence, you're impressed by what it says! Let me broaden that a little. Swenson says that the activity of the eye would require about 100 years of time for a Cray Supercomputer, and ~~that~~ yet it takes place every second. It's astonishing! When we look closely at ourselves, and then when we look at the universe around us, God's power is undeniable. Eric Metaxas' other best-selling book is called: *Miracles*. The first half of this book really deals with what Metaxas says: "The greatest miracle of the universe is the universe." He was interviewed for the *Wall Street Journal* on the remarkable display of creative power that is all around us. His interview has become the most

read article in the history of the *Wall Street Journal*: “The Miracle of The Universe Around Us.” Metaxas’ own mind and heart are gripped by the fine-tuning argument. Four fundamental forces of the universe are finely tuned to make life possible: the forces of gravity; the electromagnetic force; the weak nuclear force; and the strong nuclear force. If these four fundamental forces are even just slightly different, life is impossible in the universe. Ard Louis, a professor of Theoretical Physics at Oxford University, was interviewed last month by Eric Metaxas in a discussion of science and faith, and Ard Louis said:

“At the University of Oxford, where I teach theoretical physics, . . . plenty of physicists . . . are believers, and some of the greatest scientific minds in history were people of strong faith, including Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, Michael Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell, Lord Kelvin, J.J. Thompson and many others. More recently, Nobel Prize winners in physics Arthur Schawlow, Charles Townes, Bill Phillips and others have spoken publicly about their faith.”

I really enjoy listening to people who know a lot about something. I remember standing out in the red hills of Arizona, looking at the rock formations and thinking: “These are so beautiful!” The sun was hitting the rocks, and I thought: “Wow, look at the colors!” and I was thinking what it might take to climb one of those. As I was rejoicing in God's creative power, I was standing next to an F-16 pilot, and he allowed me access into his inner thoughts at that moment. I was thinking about colors and rock climbing and maybe taking some family photos, and he was looking at those rocks, and he said: “You know, when you're flying along at about 300 feet off the ground at 1100 miles an hour, you're going to make sure that you don't hit the biggest thing in the sky. You know what the biggest thing in the sky is? It's the earth! That's what the biggest thing in the sky is.” I just thought: “I'm glad be standing next to you, because I never would have had a thought like that.”

Ard Louis tells a story about Fred Hoyle, an atheist, a gifted scientist. Hoyle is the man who coined the words “Big Bang” in 1949 in a BBC interview. At the time, the Big Bang theory was controversial because it flew in the face of the reigning scientific paradigm of the steady state of the universe that was not changing. Louis writes: “Fred Hoyle was a very committed atheist, and so he didn't like the idea of Big Bang, because the Big Bang suggested a beginning, which suggested a beginner.” As he worked further in his research into theoretical physics, Hoyle realized that for the universe to have carbon atoms, three helium atoms need to come together, and yet this is very unlikely. Hoyle looked at the problem from the other side, as Louis describes it, and he said: “Let me turn this question around. It's very unlikely to get carbon atoms and yet we have carbon atoms.” So he did the math calculation in reverse to see what would actually be required for these three helium atoms to come together and form carbon. He reverse engineered the outcome, and he postulated that there must be a resonance, an unstable energy level, inside the atom to make this possible. He made the calculation; he

looked up in the nuclear data tables to find that this resonance was not there. He called Willie Fowler from Caltech and said: "You missed something in the nuclear data table. There is a resonance precisely at an energy level that makes the formation of carbon atoms possible, and you need to go look for it." They did, and it was right there. Without this pre-programming, if you will, carbon is not possible, and the universe would be chemically sterile and biologically sterile. Fred Hoyle, the atheist scientist said: "A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect is behind the universe," and his atheism was deeply shaken by this.

Paul says that the universe is displaying the knowledge of God, and it is available to all, and humanity is without excuse. Humanity descends further though, and Paul says in Romans 1:21a, that though this knowledge of God is all around us:

*"For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, . . ."*

Even the atheist breathes air supplied by God. We use God's resources daily, and many of us do not glorify Him or thank Him, and Paul knows wisely that this is not a neutral stance. What we believe affects us. Paul knows this, and his first move in the gospel presentation is to persuade us that this is true. We were made to know God; we were made to glorify God; we were made to give thanks to Him. If we don't, then this starts to unravel us. We see in the second half of Romans 1:21 that the effect of not giving thanks to God, not glorifying God, means:

*". . . but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."*

That our reasoning becomes futile means that we stop thinking clearly. It also means that our heart begins to be dull. It means that our capacity for emotional response goes down, according to Romans 1. It means that we stop thinking straight. It means that we stop thinking clearly. It means that our capacity to respond emotionally to the world around us starts to diminish when the creative capacity that we have to know God and glorify Him is not operating. We all recognize that we become weaker when we don't eat. We become weaker when we don't drink. We begin to deteriorate when we cease giving glory and thanks to God, our Creator.

This third phase of in the descent of humanity is not only that our thoughts become cloudy, our emotions become dull, but we make this great exchange in Romans 1:22-23:

*"Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."*

Paul uses the word *moron*. Isn't that a compliment! We need to hear that. I need to hear that. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of man and birds and animals and creeping things. Claiming to be wise, we become fools, and we exchange God's glory for worship of ourselves. I want to dive for just a moment into the way that Paul would have seen

this in his day. He is addressing the Roman society of the first century, and by extension and God's inspiration, he addresses us. In his world, his day, he saw this very clearly, an exchange of the worship of the glory of the immortal God for a compulsory worship of mortal man.

This became very vivid and real and costly during the reign of Gaius Caligula, who was the Emperor just prior to Paul's letter to the Romans. The worship of the emperors was, up to this



time, given after-the-fact: Julius Caesar was deified after he was assassinated; Augustus was worshiped after his death. But Gaius Caligula, who became the Emperor after Tiberius, believed in his own divinity, and he compelled the subjects of Rome to worship him while he was still alive. He built grandiose projects aimed at personal fame. He appeared publicly dressed as various gods and demigods. He referred to himself as a god and signed imperial documents with the signature of Jupiter. He killed his opponents at random, and on one occasion, he demanded that an entire crowd be thrown into the arena because he was bored. Caligula compelled worship for himself. One of the best preserved Roman

coins, the 'text messages' of the first century world, is this one: Gaius Caligula on one side, and on the other side you see him standing in a pose of divinity with arm outstretched, receiving the adulation of his troops. He became so infatuated with his own divinity that he required statues of himself to be set up around the Empire. In A.D. 40, he demanded that a golden statue of himself as Jupiter Zeus be set up inside the Jerusalem Temple. Paul knew these events vividly.

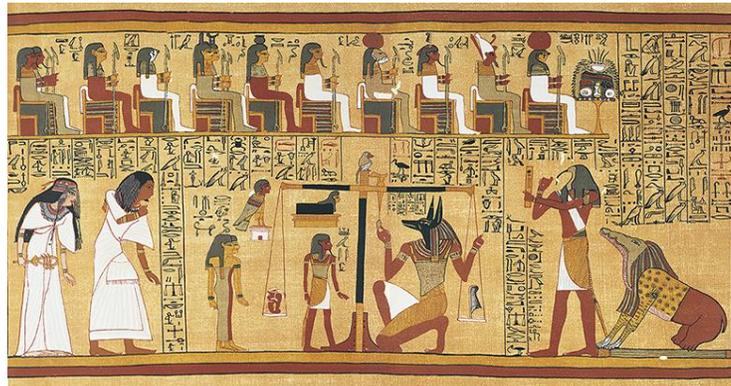


A God-fearing governor named Petronius knew that if that happened, thousands would die. So Petronius tried to delay fulfilling the Emperor's wish. The Emperor received news of this and quickly dispatched a letter that said: "If you delay carrying out my orders, the orders of a god, then you forfeit your life." He sent a message for Petronius to be assassinated, but while the couriers were on their way to Judea, Caligula himself, the 'god,' was assassinated by his own troops. The messengers who brought news to kill Petronius got caught in a storm, and so they arrived late. Meanwhile, this man, Petronius, who had delayed putting up the statue of Caligula in the Jerusalem Temple, received a letter from another courier that Caligula had been assassinated, the message arriving just days before the message in which Caligula had ordered his death. Obviously, that message was disregarded!

Paul also references the worship of birds, animals, creeping things. Part of Roman religion in the first century that Paul saw all around him was syncretistic. It was gathering traditions from

other countries and subject peoples. Clearly, what Paul has in view here is Egyptian religion where deities are depicted as birds, as animals, as hybrid creatures, which we see in the famous Papyrus of Ani. Paul knew what G.K. Chesterton would later say in the 19th century:

“When a man stops worshiping God he doesn’t then worship nothing, he worships anything.”



That's what happens to us, and when we pull back into our own moment in history, we realize that if we stop worshiping the true living God, not only do our thoughts start to become cloudy, not only do our emotions begin to be dull, but we begin to worship anything. We worship ourselves; we worship ambition; we worship adolescence, youth, ambition, intimacy. We crave. Tim Keller, ministering in the cultural epicenter of our society in New York City realizes this. He writes:

“This is counter-cultural teaching. Christians are often accused of being repressed not truly being themselves or opening themselves up to the world as it really is. But Paul says that we are all repressed for as long as hold down the truth that there is a Creator God. For as long as we suppress that truth, we will never understand who we are or why the world is as it is. It is in not acknowledging the Creator’s right to be Ruler that is repressive.”

Being repressed is a really modern word for us. Can you imagine being told not to satisfy every conceivable desire that you would have? “Oh, you poor Christians: such repressed people!” The real repression is not worshipping.

The response to the descent of humanity is that God gives us over. This is devastating language. It is repeated three times in this latter section of Romans. There is the descent of man in three stages. At the beginning of the chapter, we see that the knowledge of God is all around us. We hold that back, and then we are debased and God gives us over, breaks the line, if you will, on our surging away from Him. God hands us over first to the lusts of our own heart, to impurity. Notice the reward of yielding to what we desire.

The first outcome is that **God gives us up to our own desires**, Romans 1:24-25:

*“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”*

This outcome of doing whatever we want to do ends up dishonoring us and those around us.

He includes within this all varieties of immorality. He highlights the outworking of a lack of worship: we crave things; we desire things; we desire people, to use them; we desire things, status, intimacy; we need more, something or someone else, to satisfy, and we end up with dishonor, impurity, and shame, because we exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

The second outcome is that **God gives us up to dishonorable passions**, Romans 1:26:

*“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.”*

We live in a society today that is trying to find our passion and live out of the center of it. There is no positive use of the word *passion* in the New Testament. The word *passion* in the New Testament is restricted for an out-of-control desire, a desire that has flowed over the bounds. *Passions* describes an insatiable appetite for wealth, insatiable appetite for social status, and insatiable appetite for physical intimacy, and an insatiable appetite for rage and the satisfaction that comes with holding onto it or expressing it. First century authors describe *passions* as a devastating thing. Paul highlights one aspect of passion that is out-of-control desire. He highlights out-of-control desire in our physical person. Homosexuality in the ancient world was a regular feature of pagan culture. It was not unusual for Greeks or Romans to practice this, but this feature of the pagan world was regarded as outside the bounds of God's laws in Scripture then and, in the history of interpretation, even up until the present time. Paul's contention is that when we don't worship God, when we don't place Him at the center of our affections, our affections run wild and we crave things outside God's bounds set for us. We need to pay attention closely to this section. I know this is very controversial in our time in history, in our present cultural moment.

I want to call to remembrance the sermon we preached in the fall on Leviticus 18, which was on this topic in its entirety. You can read that manuscript or listen to that again, and I want to restate a couple of key points that we see here again. Paul has already described all sexual immorality as sinful in verse 24, and here he includes this as just another manifestation of our desires gone awry. Tim Keller describes that we sometimes have different responses and reactions to this clear teaching. This is the longest passage in the Bible on homosexuality. Keller says:

*“Some churches, in an effort to appear relevant to the culture, and to seem loving and welcoming to homosexual people, have downplayed or denied the clear teaching of Scripture on homosexuality. We might call this the liberal approach.”*

This text is not unclear. Keller goes on to say:

*“Other churches take what the Bible says on homosexuality very seriously, but in a self-righteous way. They see homosexuality as the sin that matters. They do not seek to love or*

welcome gay people at all. They may seek to love and get alongside their Hindu neighbors or friends who are committing adultery, but not homosexual people. We might characterize this as a conservative approach.

“Paul isn’t doing either. He is clear that homosexuality is a shameful over-desire. But remember, he then lists a lot of other sins which, for many of us, strike a lot closer to home, like envy or gossiping or disobedience, or disloyalty. Paul is not saying: *It doesn’t matter what you do; God doesn’t mind as long as you’re happy.* But he is also not saying: *What you do matters so much that I don’t want to love you or witness to you, because you are beyond the gospel.*”

We grasp the gospel only when we understand, as Paul did, that I am the worst sinner that I know. That is what Paul says of himself. When we say that, we have a clear grip on the gospel. I am the worst sinner that I know. When we know that, then we’re ready to move forward in response to Jesus and loving those around us.

The third outcome is that **God gives us over to a debased mind**. Paul says in Romans 1:28:

*“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”*

The word that Paul uses is one that we need to take special care to notice here. The word is an *untested, unapproved mind*, and this vocabulary will come up later in the spring with tremendous power. The word that he uses is *a mind that can’t recognize the good, can’t see it*. When we can’t see it, then we begin to live in this unraveled way. Who among us is left standing after the devastating list of Romans 1:29-31?

*“They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”*

Are any of us unscathed by this description of practicing unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice? Have you ever envied? Have you ever gossiped? Have you ever slandered someone? Have you ever been boastful or disobeyed your parents? It’s an amazing list, and in Romans 1:32, he says:

*“Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”*

Those who practice these things would deserve death, deserve God’s righteous judgment. The worst thing of all is that they not only do these things, but they heartily approve of it. They don’t see the will of God, and so they validate and approve those who practice these things.

That's what is so difficult. Though the knowledge of God is around us, when we don't worship and glorify God, our thinking becomes muddled, our affections become dull, we begin to crave our own desires, our own appetites, and activity that seems to satisfy us we wholeheartedly approve.

How does this text apply to Kenwood Baptist Church this morning? I want to ask this question: "What does it mean for us to be transformed by this passage? Romans is not an open letter to the Roman world. This passage is actually not written to the unbelieving world. It is written to the church, and we need to ask how does this passage change David Palmer? How does this passage change Kenwood Baptist Church this morning? I think first of all, it changes us because we see a picture here that maps reality. The Bible is compelling in its explanatory power. It is only the Bible that explains why we have eyes that can do a hundred years of Cray's Supercomputing in a second, that we live in a universe that is displaying the awesome power of God and we are humanity made in God's image and likeness, and yet fallen. Only the Bible explains the beauty of creation and the horror of human evil. Only the Bible gives us a picture that corresponds to what we really see around us, and we need this. But then this vision of both the beauty and the fallenness moves towards us, and it has pressed into me this week and asked me to change, and this passage is asking you to change this morning.

You can resist this transformation. You can resist the transformative power of Romans 1 by hearing this text and saying from a cool religious distance: "I'm not like that. Thank God, I'm no murderer. I'm no out-of-control person. My desires seem inbounds." You can manifest an instinct of self-preservation. You can posture a stance of self-righteousness in its darker variety. You can resist the transformative power of this text by saying: "You know the world is pretty evil out there, and God is right to judge it." You can resist this transformation, and when Paul writes Romans, he has preached and taught for thousands of hours, and he knows that half of us are thinking this way. Although some of us may enjoy feeling this way, it will not last for long, because next week, starting in Romans 2, Paul addresses this feeling and utterly demolishes it, making it impossible for us to ever feel that way again. But, let me ask you not to resist the transformation, but embrace it. This text challenges you and it challenges me in two related ways.

One is to recognize that these dynamics, these soul dynamics, apply not to 'them' but to us. Hear the spiritual warning; take to heart that you will increasingly lose your capacity to think clearly and respond emotionally to the world around you if your life is not flowing out of the center of giving glory and thanks to God. Realize that you are in great danger, that your life and my life will increasingly make less sense. We will lose our capacity to see the good clearly and affirm it as such. So, first, in order to be transformed, we take the warning seriously ourselves.

Lastly, and this has impacted me the most this week, I've asked myself dozens of times: "Why is this passage here? What is this passage really asking of me? What is this passage really asking of Kenwood Baptist Church this morning? I stepped back and realized afresh that Paul introduces this section as the motivating force of his evangelism. If you don't see the world in need of transformation, you won't reach out to it. If you don't see the world around you as really in need, you'll keep the good news to yourself. If you condemn the world as deserving God's judgment, you will stand at a distance; you will never engage the person sitting next to you in public transportation; you will never initiate a conversation on an airplane; you will never take a risk at a family reunion with relatives and friends that you know don't know Christ. You will not see them in need.

When you read back through Romans 1 and you let it ignite and fuel your compassion for the world around you, then you hear this text. You don't judge the world; you feel compassion for the world. People are straining try to keep down a 24-7, 365 days a year stream of data that says God is out there. He is your Creator. His power is overwhelming, constantly on display. Can you imagine the strain on someone's arms trying to keep that information down? That has got to be exhausting. Can you imagine the difficulty of being in a situation where, as wise as you might feel, you are utterly without excuse before God? Can you imagine the situation of being cloudy in your thinking: "I'm not thinking straight. My heart is not responding to the world around me." Can you imagine the difficulty of living out of the prison cell of your own desires? Can you imagine living in a situation where all you know is this, and you can't even imagine being different? You can't imagine how you could leave the shackles of your own cravings in a society that increasingly tells you to find out what they are and fuel them and drive them and try to satisfy them even though, like any addiction, it just rewards you less and less and less. This text changes us if we see the world in need and we move towards it. We move towards it to say with conviction and delight that if you begin to glorify God and thank Him, it's like a spring of living water opening up, cleansing you from within. That's what we need. That's what Kenwood Baptist Church needs from this passage. You may try to master a few arguments from design. You may try to articulate the sin of the world around us, but you hear this text with Paul well if it drives you to share and see the world in need.

I am going to close us in prayer, and I am going to use a prayer that is 400 years old. It is a Puritan prayer called "Regeneration," which is a fancy way of saying "make me anew, remake me." Let's take this prayer as our own. Bob Kauflin took this prayer and turned it into a praise song, and we are going to sing that. I would like to invite you to stand with me, and let's pray for regeneration of our own hearts, and then we will sing.

O God of the highest heaven,  
Occupy the throne of my heart,  
Take full possession and reign supreme,  
Lay low every rebel lust,  
Let no vile passion resist your holy war;  
Manifest your mighty power,  
And make me yours forever.

You are worthy to be  
Praised with my every breath,  
Loved with my every faculty of soul,  
Served with my every act of life.

I was dead,  
Having no eyes to see thee,  
No ears to hear thee,  
No taste to relish thy joys,  
No intelligence to know thee;

But thy Spirit has quickened me,  
Has brought me into a new world as a new creature,  
Has given me spiritual perception,  
Has opened to me thy Word as light, guide, solace, joy.  
Thy presence is to me a treasure of unending peace;

O help me then to walk worthy of Your love,  
Of my hopes, and my vocation.

Keep me, for I cannot keep myself;  
Protect me that no evil befall me;

Let me lay aside every sin admired of many;  
Help me to walk by thy side, lean on thy arm,  
Hold converse with thee,  
That henceforth I may be salt of the earth and a blessing to all.

Hallelujah, Amen.