

Who Are the Nations ■ Discovering God's Global Mission

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the mystery of how God moves individuals towards a lifelong commitment to world missions, emphasizing the importance of reaching unreached people groups. It explores the biblical truth that saving faith is a deeply personal experience in the human heart, highlighting the significance of individual souls in God's redemptive plan. The speaker reflects on the correlation between the atonement and missions, emphasizing the call to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ among all peoples. Ultimately, the sermon concludes with a profound insight into the diversity of nations, explaining how the collective praise of God's grace from varied ethnic groups magnifies His glory.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Galatians 3:7, Romans 15:9, Revelation 5:9, Ephesians 1:6

Topics: "Commitment to Missions", "Diversity in God's Plan"

Description

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Transcript

Father in heaven, we know that you're always doing more than we can see. And so we ask you to come now in this session. I'm struck, Father, with the mystery, real baffling, unquantifiable mystery of how you move people from where they are to a lifelong long commitment to world missions in an unreached people.

That is a great mystery. And I know that part of it is that you use messages, you use books, you use experiences, you use relationships, you use the Bible, you use friends who confirm or not our calling. And in the end, there is something that cannot be identified.

It is a mystery. And so I'm asking, Lord, that you do it because there are dozens in this room right now who are willing, they're touchable, and they would be fruitful for the decades to come among the unreached.

And so I pray that you do that mysterious thing, however it's done.

In Jesus' name, amen. It seems to me like every time I am called upon to speak into the global purpose of God in declaring the unsearchable riches of Christ, God seems to, he seems to step up the encouragements in my life. And as if to say to me, I'm in this, John.

This is not extraneous to your calling. I'm going to be there, step into this with expectation, for example. So this has been on my calendar for over a year, I think.

And just a couple of weeks ago, a pastor of a 10,000 person church here in the Twin Cities, 10 campuses, asked if he could meet with me, and I said, sure. And he wants to talk, just effuse about the vision that he has of sending 500 missionaries from his church to the unreached peoples of the world. And he's just full of stories about the first 146 and the messages that are coming back of God's intervention in their lives to bless peoples.

That was just a gift to me to say, do this, be about this, this is not just another thing on your schedule. And we got into this conversation about the power of God, and I could tell this guy is not a Calvinist, because I knew what denomination he belonged to. But I told him, you know, you know when you talk about the power of God converting people from death to life, you sound like a Calvinist.

And he laughed, and we had this great conversation about why charismatics need Reformed theology and Reformed people need charismatic experience. So we got along quite well. Then, as if that weren't enough encouragement to get about preparation for this talk, I got this email from a young lady that sat where you are and went through Radius.

Here's what she wrote. After all your years of preaching, perhaps you've wondered at times, are they going? Have they actually left and abandoned their homes and taken the gospel to the unreached? Yes. After attending the Cross Conference in 2013, 2016, 2019, I went to Radius and was trained there.

And three months ago, I arrived in Chad with my team of nine to seek to reach the people. We're only at the beginning, but perhaps when I am your age, if God wills it, I will see with my own eyes what you've seen coming as well, a church among the people. For his glory.

And she gave her name. Then, just a few weeks ago, I get this really encouraging email from from Matt Schmucker that the Louisville, Kentucky has listed all their limits on the Cross Conference, and we can do real live, in person for 18 to 25 year olds this December, the Cross Conference again. And then, one more encouragement.

The team at Desiring God just rallied around a vision for a different kind of online global digital missions conference, not for young people, but for old people. I'm the oldest baby boomer in the world, except for those who were born in the first 11 days of January 1946, which is probably a few thousand. But there's 69 million of us still alive, and next year their ages will be 56 to 76, and they own over half the wealth in America.

Fifty- dollars. And they are all tempted to waste the last quarter of their lives, and most of them do waste the last quarter of their lives. And the energy and the resources and the insight and the wisdom that lies there, untapped, boggles my mind.

Good grief. I'm 75, okay, and I love work. I cannot imagine people not working for Jesus.

They treat life as though heaven starts at retirement, when in fact, heaven starts at heaven, not before. It's a sin to start heaven before heaven. Well, anyway, the point was I got all excited because Desiring God said, let's do it.

Okay, so it's as though, it's as though when I get an invitation to do something like this, God just kind of looks over my shoulder and says, do that. That's not extraneous to your calling. I don't care that you've never been a missionary.

Just go talk to those people and tell them what the Bible says. And so that's all to say I'm happy to be here right now. So the Radius, this man down here, the Radius leadership, asked me to talk about who are the people, who are the nations, who are the peoples? Because it says right there in the Great Commission, go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

Panta taethne. You've all heard that little Greek phrase thrown around, Matthew 28, 19. So what does nations mean? Now, here's where I'm going at it.

I'm going to talk a good bit about nations, peoples, tribes, families, languages, cultures, because the Bible does. But I'm aware at the very outset that the danger exists, at least it does for me, that I can get so caught up into groupthink and group talk that I lose touch with a radically essential biblical truth. So I'm going to start by declaring that radically essential biblical truth.

It's this. There is only one organ of saving faith, and that is the individual human soul. Families, tribes, peoples, nations do not have the organ of saving faith.

That is the organ by which one can believe. They don't. The place where the miracle of regeneration intersects the fallen world is the individual human soul.

Nowhere else. Passing from death to life through the divine gift of saving faith happens only in the human soul, or as it's sometimes called, the heart. Whatever the people group, whatever the nation, whatever the tribe, whatever the family, whatever the language group, the miracle of passing from death to life, from being a child of wrath to a child of God, a new creation in Christ, that miracle happens in the human heart only.

Second Corinthians 4.6, God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. No one can see the light of the glory of God in Christ on our behalf. We see it with the eyes of our heart, as Paul called them in Ephesians 1.18, or we perish.

Saving faith is a radically individual, personal experience, or nothing. So, the first thing I want to say in response to the question, who are the nations, is this. They are groups of individuals who live or die by the authenticity of the saving faith in each heart.

That's who they are. Now, the Great Commission—you probably don't need to look it up because you all know it—the Great Commission points in that direction. We'll start there, just to give some biblical warrant for what I'm saying beside 2nd Corinthians 4.6. Make disciples of all nations, Greek ethne, plural neuter, plural neuter, and in inflected languages, pronouns that come after agree with their antecedent in gender, case, number.

Ring any bells from seventh grade? Make disciples of all nations, ethne, baptizing them, plural masculine, not neuter, does not agree with ethne, though that's its antecedent seemingly, and teaching them, altus, plural masculine. So, Jesus spoke this out, and Matthew wrote it out, so as to make the pronoun and its antecedent disagree in gender. Why? They're not careless.

My answer to that question. Because individuals have minds and hearts that can be taught all things, and individuals have hearts to believe and bodies to be baptized. Groups don't have bodies that can be baptized.

Only individuals have bodies that can be baptized. Groups don't have hearts that believe. Only individuals have hearts that believe.

Groups don't have minds that can be taught. Only human heads have brains that are minds that can be taught. And he was pointing to that, that these nations translate into plural individuals when they're baptized and believe and are taught.

At the last day, Jesus said in Matthew 25, 31, all the nations will be gathered before him as he sits on his glorious throne. Panta ta ethne. Same phrase as the Great Commission.

All the nations will be gathered before him on that last day, and it does not say that he will separate nation from nation. What does it say? He will separate sheep from goats among the nations. He didn't purchase nations.

He purchased people from nations. Revelation 5, 9. By your blood, you ransom people for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation. He purchased the elect.

He purchased people with his own blood among all the peoples of the world. So the first thing I want to say, again, is who are the nations that we are to disciple? They are groups of individuals who live or die by the authenticity of the saving faith in each heart. So, question.

If God's work in human individuals is so decisive in regeneration, in the formation of a new people, for the bride of the Son of God, why in God's general providence is the world so thoroughly composed of differing groups, ethnicities, cultures, tribes, nations? Why in the world, God, did you do it this way? Why'd you make a world like that if the decisive point where salvation intersects humanity is the individual's soul? What's with all the diversity, culturally, ethnically, language? Oh my goodness. What a world. And why in God's saving providence—so that's general providence that sets up a world with infinite diversity—why in God's saving providence does his plan of redemption involve such a pervasive concern with those people groups? Which it does throughout the Bible, which is another way of asking this question.

Why in the last 50 years has global missions become so remarkably focused on unreached peoples instead of unreached people and places? I'm old enough to bear witness that I grew up in a home very missionary-oriented, and never once in my 18 years praying with my missionary-oriented mom and dad, never once did I hear them pray for peoples. I would have thought it was a grammatical mistake. It's already plural.

What's with the S? Really? Nobody prayed for peoples in 1955. Well, what did we pray for? God blessed the missionaries on the home and foreign fields. Missionaries went to fields.

They didn't go to peoples. In 1950, I didn't realize that I was living close to Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. I was in Munich, Germany, and I didn't realize that a bomb had been dropped at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization by Ralph Winter, when he pointed out to all these bragging missionary leaders who said, We're in every country in the world! Christianity is in every country in the world! And Ralph Winter stands up and says, Excuse me? There are 24,000 peoples in the world, and half of them have never heard the gospel by your missionaries that are in every country in the world.

And from 74 to today, there's been a seismic shift in the way people think and talk about the goal of missions, from get to countries, get to places, get to fields, to get to the peoples. I didn't realize in those days, growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, that when I spoke about the Cherokee Nation, which I did because we could drive through it in an hour, that I was a lot closer to biblical categories than when we spoke about the nation of Argentina, the nation of the United States, the nation of Britain, the nation of Japan. What in the world was that? Cherokee Nation.

So my own thinking underwent a huge transformation in the late 80s and early 90s, and Ralph Winter was then, is now, while he's in heaven, one of my heroes, and was in my house numerous times telling me how to redesign the house to be more missionary oriented. He walks in the back door, okay? First time he's ever in my house. This guy's an engineer by trade, and he's a missionary statesman.

So he walks in my house, and he stops like this, looks around, he says, You know, if you built a wall right here, then that room there, with its own bathroom there, could be a little missionary apartment. I love this guy. Everywhere he looks, he's redesigning the world.

He is, seriously. He's redesigning the world for the sake of Christ. So if you're an engineer, there's a place for you.

So let's take a look at the biblical evidences for peoples, nations. Where do they fit, if what you're saying about individuals is so central? And I'm going to argue that God's purposes for the world cannot properly be accounted for if you focus only on individuals. And missionary planning cannot properly be done only in the pursuit of individuals.

Both God's purposes and mission strategy must take account of the biblical emphasis on nations, peoples, tribes, languages, families. So let's start with the phrase, Panteta Ethne, in Matthew 28, 19. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

Now, you will hear sometimes people say, Ethne? You can even hear it? Ethnic Ethne? Ethne, lexically, by the very word means ethnic group. That's not true. Sorry, but it's not true.

It can, but it can also refer to a non-Jewish person in the singular, or it can refer to a group of non-Jewish people with no reference to any people group at all. For example, in Ephesians 3, 6, Paul speaks of the Ethne, Gentiles, who are members of the body of Christ. That's not people groups.

That's Christian non-Jews, plural Ethne. Ethne occurs, in the plural, 130 times in the New Testament Greek. The ESV translates it nations 33 of those 130 times.

All the rest are translated Gentiles, sometimes referring to nations, sometimes referring to individual non-Jews. Therefore, when you read Pontata Ethne, you cannot say automatically, because of the lexical meaning of Ethne, therefore, he's talking about ethnic groups. You can't do it.

Language doesn't work that way. You have to argue another way, which is what I'm going to do. You have to broaden out your understanding of the Bible and see if the Bible is leading you to that interpretation of Pontata Ethne, not just the lexical meaning of the word itself.

The context is going to make all the difference. For example, if you find in the New Testament the phrase Pontata Ethne, and it happens to be translating a Hebrew Old Testament phrase that has to be peoples, that's a good argument that the Ethne here refers to peoples, because that's what it was in the Hebrew, and Romans 15:11 is a good example, and we'll get there in a few minutes. So, for the last 35 years of my missionary preaching, I have tended not to start with Matthew 28:19, partly because it's so familiar, partly because it's got that ambiguity in it.

Instead, I end there, which I will, and I go to my lodestar text. This is my real, real missionary text, namely Revelation 5:9. The four living creatures and the 24 elders in heaven fall down before the Lamb, and they sing this. Worthy are you to take the scroll—I think to unroll the final chapters of history—to take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth. Now, what makes that, those two verses, verses 9 and 10 of Revelation 5, what makes them so powerful is that those two verses correlate the design of the atonement and the design of missions. Right? God's distinct purpose and design in the atonement, the slaying of the Lamb of God, and the goal of missions, the outcome of missions, the aim of missions, are correlated in this verse like nowhere else in the Bible.

In the atonement, God ransomed by the blood of the Lamb a people from every tribe and language and people and nation, and now our missionary calling correlates with that. You go get what he bought! Go get them! You know, the Moravians were not the only missionaries inspired by Revelation 5, but probably the Moravians gave expression to the beauty of the missionary implications of this text better than anybody, and in the middle of the 18th century, they would get on their ships in North Germany to disappear forever out of their family's lives to peoples they had no idea where they'd eat them or not, and as the ships pulled out from shore, they would lift their hands and say, May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering. That came straight out of Revelation 5-9.

May the Lamb that was slain in my ministry receive the reward of his suffering. He was slain for them, and I'm gonna go be the means by which he gets his reward for his suffering. I cannot imagine a vision of life more precious than that.

I mean, if you could wake up every morning and preach to yourself, I am the instrument in the hands of the grace of God by which the Lamb slain will receive the reward of his suffering. Straight out of Revelation 5-9. Then from my lodestar text, Revelation 5-9, I go back to Genesis and I ask, okay, how did you set that in motion? Like, if the goal was that a Messiah would break into the world, die, and purchase a people from all the languages and tribes and families of the world, how did you get ready for that? It's a very strange answer.

It's not the way I would have done it. I mean, how roundabout can it get than to start with one Jewish man and focus on the Jews for 2,000 years in order to reach the nations? I mean, that's strange, super strange, and you need, at some point in your life, to come to terms with why you believe that's the case. I wrote an article a year ago or so—no, it was Christmastime, and I said—the name of the article was, Why Was Jesus Born a Jew? I mean, that's hyper-offensive to Palestinians or anybody else who thinks it through.

Super offensive that the Son of God would take incarnate form in one ethnicity as a male. Good night. So, think that one through.

And my answer was to put to shame every ethnic pride, including Jewish, but that's another message. Genesis 12-2, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. He's saying this not to Abram, a Hebrew.

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So, there's the goal of selecting one ethnicity to focus on for 2,000 years—Jews. So that in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Now, that promise is repeated four times in the book of Genesis—1818, 2218, 264, 2814—and one of those, 1818, is quoted by Paul in Galatians 3, the most important arc you could ever draw from Abrahamic promise to the gospel. It's awesome. Here's what he says.

Galatians 3-7, Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. You believe in the Messiah? You're a child of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles' ethnicity by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying—and then he quotes 1818, this promise—in you shall Pontata ethne be blessed.

Oh, so now I've got some warrant for thinking that as this promise comes into the New Testament and Jesus and Paul pick it up and make it a commission, we've got some biblical foundations for saying Pontata ethne means families, tribes, peoples, language groups, ethnicities, more than individuals. Amazing. So you believe on the Jewish Messiah, and all the nations from which you come will be included.

And then finally, I point to Paul's self-understanding as a missionary in trying to work my way from the wider biblical picture back to Matthew 28, 19, and all the nations and who they are. So my last step in my thinking is to go to Paul's understanding of his calling as an apostolic missionary. How did he think about himself? He says in Romans 15, 9—and I think 15, 9 to 24 is about one of the most important missionary texts in the Bible—he said that the Jewish Messiah came into the world, quote, in order that the Gentiles—ethne—maybe nations, maybe individual non-Jews, ambiguous, right?—in order that the nations or in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

So Jewish Messiah comes so that nations glorify God for mercy. How's that gonna happen? And then, in the next verses, Paul strings together, weaves together, three Old Testament texts from the law, from the Psalms, from the prophets. This is not—this is not accidental.

Three Old Testament texts, and he quotes them in a way to show what he means by ethne. So here's verse 11 that I said we'd come back to, Romans 15, 11. And Paul says, quoting Psalm 17, 1, "Praise the Lord, Pantathai ethne, and let all the peoples extol him." Okay, now you know how parallelism in the Psalms work, right? You got a statement and a parallel statement, statement, parallel statement.

That's the way most Hebrew poetry works. Parallels. State, state, no rhyme, no meter, but lots of parallelism.

And the parallels explain each other. They help you understand what both halves are about. So let me read it again.

Paul's unpacking the statement, "'The Son of Man,' or the Messiah, came so that the Gentiles, the ethne, would glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "'Praise the Lord, Pantathai ethne, let all the Laoi peoples extol him.'" In other words, in Paul's mind, that Old Testament text, now quoted as in Greek as Pantathai ethne, was a clear representation of peoples with an S. So John Piper had to relearn his grammar, because in Greek, Laos meant people, and Laoi meant peoples. And that's the parallel with nations here.

Therefore, clearly, Paul, at this point, is thinking, the Son of Man came, the Jewish Messiah came, for the sake of all those pagan peoples out there, all those barbarians out there, all those crazy groupings. And here's how he goes on, here's how he interprets his own calling in the light of this. This is verse 19 of Romans 15.

"From Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum." Okay, now get this. You're looking here, so here's Jerusalem over here, and here's the Mediterranean, Aegean Sea, Greece, Illyricum up there near Albania, all right? So, "'From Jerusalem'—this is just outrageous—'all the way around, up through Syria, across Asia Minor, Turkey, down through Greece, up toward Albania, I'm done.' I mean, listen. "'From Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ, and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel now where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation.

But, as it is written, those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand. But now I no longer have any room for work in this region.'" Paul, you're crazy. You're out of your mind.

"How I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain." What did he mean? "I have no room for work." There were tens of thousands of unbelievers left in Asia Minor. You know how I know that? Because he left Timothy at Ephesus and told him to do the work of an evangelist. What do you mean? He meant, "I'm a missionary.

I'm done. The churches are planted. The pastors are in place.

The elders are trained. I'm going to Spain. That's my calling." You know, sometimes there's this big argument among—I mean, there was.

Maybe there's not so much today, but when I was trying to help people catch on to Unreached Peoples, most of our missionaries at Bethlehem were out with agencies that had put them in the Philippines and in Brazil, and they were just drowning in missionaries, right, with groups that had been evangelized for a hundred years. And I didn't want to make those missionaries feel bad, right? Because some of you are in this room, right? You've given your life alongside a hundred missionaries in a place to build the church, make it stronger. I don't want to ruin your life.

And so I argued, there are Paul-type missionaries and Timothy-type missionaries. And the reason I was willing to call Timothy a type of missionary is because he left Lyster. Lyster was home for Timothy.

Ephesus wasn't home. Ephesus was another cosmopolitan world for Timothy, and Timothy was installed in Ephesus as the pastor. And Paul said, I'm out of here.

You stay there. You stay there. You build that church.

You grow that church. But you're a transplanted pastor-type missionary, and I'm not. And then I just looked at my church, and I said, look, all I want to do is wave a flag that some of you in this room are called to be

Paul-type missionaries.

We will never, ever, ever get the job done if God doesn't raise up an army of Paul-type missionaries who say, I got no room in Minneapolis. There is no room for me to work in Minneapolis, because we have 1,200 evangelical churches in Minneapolis. We do not need missionaries here, except for the Mali's and the people groups.

You've got to learn a language in order to make a dent in the Muslim peoples in these cities. So, against that backdrop. So, Revelation 5-9, Genesis 12, Galatians 3, Romans 15.

Okay, we could do so much more to provide the backdrop, but against that backdrop, I return now to Matthew 28-19. Go make disciples of Panta Taethne, or all nations. And I believe I have good warrant from wider biblical teachings, including Jesus's, to say that it includes this meaning.

Go and preach the unsearchable riches of Christ among all the peoples of the world. And, you know, just a little parenthesis here in response to Brooks's comment of language peoples, or ethnic peoples, or culture peoples, or, you know, football peoples, or taxi driver peoples. I totally sympathize with that correction, but I'm really not picky.

If you can show me an unreached group of any kind and give your life to it, but you don't need— really, you don't need to have the problem solved of precise definition between Revelation 5-9, you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe, tongue, people, nation. You do not need to know where to draw the lines between those four in order to reach them. You don't.

You just need to want to. Really bad. Now, let me end like this.

Go back to my emphasis at the beginning on individuals, and I'm posing myself the ultimate questions now. Let's see if we can end by putting the diversity of the peoples together with the individual heart of saving faith, and see why God did it this way. Okay? So, I set it up that regeneration and passing from death to life happens only in one place, namely, the individual human soul, and so the locus of salvation starts there.

And then I added, the Bible is pervasively concerned with people groups. Now, how do they come together? And my conviction is this. God decided that the human heart would be the point where his saving grace takes hold of humanity, because the goal of salvation, according to Ephesians 1.6, is the praise of the glory of the grace of God.

That's the ultimate goal of the universe. The praise of the glory of the grace of God, Ephesians 1.6, 1.12, 1.14. But the essence of praise is not the movement of lips. This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me, Matthew 15.8. The essence of praise is the admiring gladness of the human heart in the glory of the grace of God.

The essence of praise is the admiring gladness of the human heart in the glory of the grace of God. So, God has made glad trusting, admiring, treasuring of the glory of his grace in the human heart the centerpiece of his ultimate purpose for the universe. Not the redeemed body, this body right here, as much as I'll be very happy to get one of those.

Not the new earth, not the new heavens with trillions of galaxies magnifying the power of God. Those will not be the centerpiece of the purpose of the universe, but rather the human heart, white-hot with pleasure

in the glory of God. That will be the centerpiece of the ultimate purpose of God.

But there's another principle at work in attaining the ultimate goal of the greatest glorification of God, the glory of the grace of God, praised as it ought to be. There's another principle at work. Namely, I'll state the principle.

The fame and greatness and worth of an object of beauty shines with greater brightness in direct proportion to the diversity of those who rejoice in its beauty. That's a complicated sentence, so I'm going to read it again, because I believe it is the answer to why God made the world diverse. Why did he do it? Why not just one kind of people? Why thousands and thousands of ethnic groups? Why? Why, God? It just makes things harder.

Yeah, it does. Here's my thesis. The fame and greatness and worth of an object of beauty—I'm thinking God here, the glory of God—shines with greater brightness in direct proportion to the diversity of those who rejoice in its beauty.

If all believing human hearts were of one people group, one kind of human being, if all believing human hearts were from one people group, the full, glad praise of God in that group would be a wonderful glory to God for his salvation. Yes, it would be. But if, in the end, all the redeemed hearts come from ten thousand different ethnic groups, then their united pleasure in the glory of God's grace will shine with a brightness of praise far beyond the praise of any one group.

That is the ultimate reason for the diversity of the nations, and that is the ultimate reason why missions exist. Let's pray. So, Father in heaven, I praise you that you didn't create the world the way I would have.

You didn't set up the salvation of the nations the way I would have. You are God, and I am not. I would not have it any other way.

I'm happy to get under your purposes and let you teach, let you speak, let you work, let you rule. And I ask now, Lord, that with this brief effort to clarify what are we after in the peoples, in the hearts among the nations, in the ultimate end, would you motivate in ways that I cannot begin to imagine everyone in this room that you intend to have among the peoples? I ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

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