

# The Life of Abraham - Part 2

by W.F. Anderson

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*Abraham's journey teaches us about God's grace in difficult situations and the importance of trusting God over cultural patterns and self-preservation.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 12:8, Genesis 13:1-4, Genesis 13:13-15, Genesis 13:18

**Topics:** "Faith And Obedience", "Gods Promises"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the story of Abraham in the Book of Genesis. He emphasizes the theme of restoration and how God can bring us out of the mess we create for ourselves. The speaker shares a personal anecdote about encountering a couple who believed in salvation through calling upon the name of the Lord. He highlights the importance of relating God's promises to our own lives and making decisions based on His word rather than our natural instincts or cultural values.

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## Transcript

without a musical tradition or background, and we miss this. By the way, Mr. Woodhouse, if you ever take this choir on tour, let us know, will you? Let's turn again tonight to the book of Genesis, and I'd like once more to go to chapter 13. I'm afraid I chopped things up a bit.

I really didn't intend to do this tonight, but I don't know how to pick up the thread from this morning and skip over chapter 13, so I'm going to read a good section out of chapter 13 beginning with verse 1, and we'll read through verse 13 of this 13th chapter. And again, if I don't have this microphone properly positioned, or if I drop my voice too much and you cannot hear me, and you don't want to hear me, just go to sleep, okay? So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and locked with him into the Negev. Now, Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.

And he journeyed on from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called on the name of the Lord. And Lot who went with Abram also had flocks, and herds, and tents, so that the Lamb could not support both of them dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together.

And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle. At that time, the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land, which meant they couldn't expand their pasture land right in that immediate area, because the land was already occupied by these tribes in the land of

Canaan itself. Then Abram said to Lot, Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen.

Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right. Or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.

And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere, like the Garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. Now, the direction of Zoar is not the land of Egypt, but it was a small town to the south end of the Jordan plain, and it's in that direction that Lot was looking from this vantage point where he was staying with Abram. But it looked like the Garden of Eden, the land of Egypt.

And this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley, and Lot journeyed east, and they separated from each other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt among the cities of the valley, and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

Now, the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. One of the maturing processes through which we go, and it lasts all our lifetime, is learning to respond to life according to the principles of the word of God, and not according to our learned emotional reactions. We have certain instinctive reactions to situations, and we have certain learned reactions that are deeply ingrained in us so that they become second nature.

And one of the works of the Spirit of God is to teach us not to respond that way to life situations, but to respond in keeping with the principles of God's word. When you come to the New Testament, it's those lists that Paul gives, for instance, that says, put off this and put on this. It's put off and put on.

Don't do this, do that. In place of that characteristic behavior pattern that's our normal response to life, the Spirit of God is saying, act this way. Don't act that way anymore.

Act this way. And all of us have those ingrained patterns that we're not even aware of sometimes. When we get into a moment of crisis, for instance, some of us blow our stacks.

We just lose our temper. And there's furniture and dishes and everything flying all over the place before we know what's happened. And it's just an instinctive or learned behavior pattern that is not second nature to us.

Some of us reach a crisis of disappointment or discouragement. We crawl into the hole and pull the hole in behind us. And nobody could find us if they tried.

And we stay in there wallowing in our self-pity. And we have all sorts of behavior patterns in responding to crisis situations in life that are simply non-Christian and non-biblical. I can be very dogmatic, for instance, about an opinion that I have.

And I can put you down if you disagree with me. Because, of course, you're wrong. But I'm not defending the truth.

What's really going on is that my ego structure is wrapped up in my idea. And I can't distinguish between myself and my idea. So that if you disagree with my idea, you're disagreeing with me.

And I can't stand that. And I respond defensively. And what the Spirit of God is trying to do is teach me not to respond that way in life situations.

And as you read the life of Abraham, you watch the process through which this man goes in responding to life according to the promises of God and not according to his cultural or his own instinctive behavior patterns. But he has to learn that. And all of us, hopefully, who know Jesus Christ, are in the process of learning the same thing.

And maybe we can get some help from what Abraham went through in learning that in his life. As we saw this morning, he faced the first great crisis of his faith. And that was the famine that struck the land of Canaan.

His response to that was the normal cultural response of the people among whom he lived down to Egypt. I'm not saying that was wrong. I have some reservations about it, simply because of the language of chapters 12 and 13.

But it was the normal thing for the people of his culture to do in a famine in the land of Palestine, because there was always grain in Egypt. And so they went down to Egypt to sustain life. That's not always wrong.

God sent Jacob and his children down there to preserve them in famine, sent them down to Egypt. He sent Joseph on ahead to prepare the way for them. So simply because Abraham went to Egypt does not mean he was wrong.

But I rather suspect that he followed the natural cultural pattern without really weighing the thing before God. And so much of our responses to life, so many of them are the same thing. The way our society, our American way of life, the way our culture has taught us to life is the way we instinctively respond to it without really consulting God and taking the principles of the Word of God into consideration.

Our value structures, our goals are by and large determined by our own culture. What our country, what our culture thinks is important, we think is important. What our culture thinks are good goals for young people in their career thinking are good goals for us in our career thinking.

And unfortunately, we do not inject God and the Word of God and spiritual goals into our thinking. And we respond the way our society has taught us to respond without even being aware of it. Now, frankly, in one case, that's exactly what the Word of God means by being worldly.

Being worldly is a far more devastating thing than playing a game of cards, or going to a show, or going to a dance. Worldliness is a way of life. It's a viewpoint that can take into account only what is temporal, that picks up its values from the culture around us.

And we set our values by our culture and not by the Word of God. And I find myself doing this. I find myself looking at assemblies and churches and determining their success by their numerical size.

And I get awfully discouraged because in our town in Florence, we have what has been designated as the fastest growing church in the whole of the state of South Carolina. And here we are, a little handful of people. And I say, what's wrong with us? And there may be something wrong with us, but I'm asking the questions in the wrong viewpoint.

Because I have bought the American idea that the bigger the better. And I was talking with a Presbyterian pastor in Florence not too long ago, who pastors an evangelical Presbyterian church. And I asked him if that didn't bother him.

He said, no. I got out of the numbers race a long time ago. I'm more interested in what's going on in the lives of people than I am in the number of people we may attract.

But there I was, operating on what was strictly a cultural basis. Now, I'm not saying big crowds are wrong. And I'm not saying small churches are spiritual.

As I probably told you last year, there are a lot of small churches that are dead and don't have enough sense to carry out a funeral. But the idea is the size is not the determining factor. What's going on in the lives of people? That's the determining factor whether God is at work or not.

Are people growing, maturing? Are they developing in their Christian life? Are they responding to life according to the word of God or still following their old behavior patterns? And Abraham in that decision to go into Egypt was simply following a cultural behavior pattern. But he faced a second crisis when he got into Egypt caused by his decision to go into Egypt in the first place. And the second crisis he faced was much more severe than the first one.

The second crisis he faced was possibly getting murdered. And that's a rather severe crisis, I would think. But he was going down into Egypt and his wife was very beautiful.

By the way, let's see, she'd be at least 60 years old by this time. But when you think of their lifespan, you realize that equivalent to today she would be in her 30s and a very, very beautiful woman. And Abraham knew how kings like the pharaohs of Egypt acquired their harems.

And they knew on what basis the choice was made, the same basis that our American men pick their wives today. It's strictly a matter of physical beauty. What she is like as a person would never have crossed the mind of a pharaoh who cares.

He's not going to spend any time with her anyhow, at least not in any sort of conversation. So they were picked entirely for their physical beauty. You remember the story of Esther in the Old Testament.

So when word came to Pharaoh that there was an exceedingly beautiful woman who had just arrived in town, Pharaoh took the report of those of his court and said, fine, bring her in. Oh, there's only one problem, Pharaoh, she's married. Well, unmarry her.

How do you unmarry her? You cut off her husband's head and she's no longer married. And so as they went down into Egypt, Abraham knew that this was probably hard for him to tell what happened. The report got to Pharaoh about this beautiful Sarai.

Off comes Abraham's head. There's no more problem about the marriage. And so in fear, and in a decision he had made years before, as we learned from chapter 20, he tells Sarai, tell everybody you're my sister.

It was a half-truth because she was a half-sister, but a half-truth is always worse than the whole truth. It has enough truth in it to open the door for the lie. Now, his decision to go into Egypt may have been a mistake based on a cultural pattern.

His decision to lie was not a mistake. It was motivated by the strongest instinct that we possess in that self-preservation. And Abraham gave support to Satan's charge, skin for skin, all that a man has will he give for his life.

I don't know how Abraham expected to get Sarai out of that situation, but he was willing to sacrifice his wife and her honor for his own life. It's hard to think of Abraham doing that, but he did. But how many of us Christian men sacrifice our wives for our own ego and our self-esteem? But he was perfectly willing to sacrifice Sarai for his own life.

Fortunately, God thought more of Sarai than Abraham did. Abraham had not yet learned, as I was suggesting this morning, the implication of God's promises for his own life. He would learn it.

We'll see some of that in chapter 13, but he had not yet learned that. How could Pharaoh or anyone else take off Abraham's head when God had promised that a great nation would come from Abraham, and he didn't have one single descendant? How could Pharaoh lift a finger against Abraham when God had said, the one that curses you I will curse? But Abraham didn't see the relationship between the promise of God and his immediate situation. And I face the same problem.

I don't have any difficulty trusting God for eternity because it isn't here. My problem is trusting God for today, and especially for tomorrow. I know tomorrow isn't here, but I worry about it anyhow.

And I can trust God for the unseen future of eternity, but my problem is trusting God in the crises I face today. That's my problem. And that was Abraham's problem.

He was unable to relate God's promise to the immediate situation he was facing right then. And so he resorted to the instinct of self-preservation, and he would sacrifice Sarai to save his own life. God got him out of it.

Isn't God good? You see King David down in Philistia. He wasn't king yet, but he was already anointed, and he was going to be king. Running away from Saul, acting like a madman because he feared the Philistine.

Well, I think I probably mentioned it last year. He was an idiot. He walks into Philistia carrying the sword of Goliath.

That was about as dumb a thing as you could do. Everybody would recognize that huge sword of Goliath. Who beheaded Goliath with it? David.

And if he had had a town crier going before him saying, I'm the guy that killed your champion, he couldn't have announced anything more publicly than walking in there with the sword of Goliath. And fearing for his life, the only way that he saw out was to act like he was crazy. And yet out of that situation comes a lovely psalm of deliverance.

David got himself into an awful mess, but God got him out. Abraham gets himself into an awful mess here, and God got him out. But isn't that the work of a shepherd? Isn't that exactly why our Lord Jesus designates himself as the good shepherd? He hasn't exactly flattered us in calling us sheep, you know.

The stupidest animal alive. Always getting lost. That's his characteristic.

We see that when we preach the gospel, don't we? All we like sheep have gone astray, and then we forget that our Lord Jesus Christ calls us his sheep. Because our natural bent, even as Christians, is to go astray. And the shepherd is always bringing us back.

And the lovely thing about him is he never gets tired of it. I think I'd get to the point finally and say, well go on, fall over the cliff, I'm tired of going after you. But he never gets tired of it.

And here is God reaching into this ugly situation and getting Abram and Sarai out of the mess of their own creating. Now that's the grace of God. I don't think God sends every difficult situation into my life.

A lot of it is simply the consequences of Adam's fall. As I suggested this morning, we live in a world that's already under the curse. I don't think God sends disease.

Good things come from the hand of God. But God does not prevent it. God is not constantly working miracles to protect his children from the normal course of life.

But what God will do, since he is the God of grace, is get into an ugly situation and bring good out of it. That means the situation is still ugly, but the grace of God works good out of it. That's the cross.

God got into the ugly situation of our sin and works salvation out of it. We don't praise sin. We don't rejoice because sin came into the world.

We don't thank God for sin. We thank God for the grace that got into our sin and brought out salvation through the sacrifice of his son. So God gets into our ugly situations and by his grace he brings us out.

And that's what he did for Abram and Sarai. Now I think if we had a testimony meeting tonight, all of us, if we were honest, could recount many, many times he has done the same thing for us. When he's reached into the mess we have created for ourselves and he's brought us out.

Abram got something else out of that. He got a stinging rebuke from a pagan monarch. That must have been a humbling experience for the man of faith.

But he got it nevertheless and he needed it. But in chapter 13 there is, in the first four verses, his restoration. I take it it's his restoration.

I take it because of the descriptive language that's employed and because of the climax at the close of verse 4 that he called on the name of the Lord. It's obvious as you read those first few verses of chapter 13 that the writer is not giving us a simple description of Abram's journey. He throws in too many ideas to make us think that.

He talks about that altar that Abram built at the first and he tells us where it was. And he tells us Abram went back to it and there he called on the name of the Lord. It's not a simple geographic description of he went from this place to that place to that place and finally got to Bethel.

No. No. It's the Spirit of God telling us of Abram's spiritual journey back to God.

And when he got to Bethel he called on the name of the Lord. That's a lovely thing to do isn't it? When I was very, very young. I shouldn't say very, I was a young man.

And that wasn't so long ago. Don't look at me like that. I remember going door to door in a ghetto area of a large city just trying to give out some tracts and talk to people about Jesus Christ.

And I came to a dilapidated back porch where two elderly people were sitting and one was dressed in white from head to foot. And I said, uh oh, I'm in trouble already. This is some sort of religious individual.

And as I tried to share the gospel of Jesus Christ I was surprised to find that she came out with one verse of scripture. Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. And the man I took to be her husband sitting beside her then started saying, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

And she said to me, that's the way to be saved. Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Now at the time I knew there was something wrong with that.

But I couldn't define it. But I see what it is now. Calling upon the name of the Lord is not the same thing as calling the name of the Lord.

Calling upon the name of the Lord is not repeating His name. There's a difference between my wife calling me for supper and calling upon me for something else. And Paul uses that expression when he suddenly realizes that he's not going to get a fair trial either in Caesarea or in Jerusalem.

And he says, I appeal to Caesar. And that's the same verb that Paul uses in his letter to the Romans. Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, whosoever shall appeal to the name of the Lord shall be saved.

And what was Paul doing when he appealed to Caesar? I removed my case. And he has that right as a Roman citizen. I removed my case from your jurisdiction, from the jurisdiction of any lesser court, and I cast my case into the hands of Caesar himself.

And as you know, the name stands for the revelation of who the person is and what he is. And to call upon the name of the Lord is to do in regard to Jesus Christ just what Paul did in regard to Caesar. I cast myself, my whole case, into the hands of Jesus Christ.

Now that's what Abram did when he got back to Bethel. Himself. And that whole sordid mess.

There's no one else I can turn to. Isn't that what we were singing tonight? There isn't anyone else I can turn to. Where else are you going to lay that mess? Where else are you going to find forgiveness? Where else are you going to find a new start? No, you come and you call on the name of the Lord.

And the beautiful thing is when you do that, both his ear and his heart are open. You never get a busy signal from God. In fact, he was there at Bethel before Abram was.

And he was waiting for Abram when he called on the name of the Lord. I don't know anything about you. I don't know where all you folks are in your own spiritual journey.

Maybe some of us here tonight need to do that tonight. Maybe we've had our own Egypt experience. Maybe we're still floundering because of it.

Maybe even right now, in the course of this service, in our own hearts, we need to turn back to the Lord. And he says, you shall seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart. All he asks is that you meet it.

That's all. Now, further on in chapter 13, Abram begins to work out the implications of the promise of God in chapter 12. Because of the great wealth that had been accumulated in Egypt, and a large part of it, the gifts of Pharaoh, when he supposed that Abram was Sarai's brother.

And, of course, in that case, if it's a responsible male member of the family, whether it's the father or the brother, and obviously the father wasn't here, then great gifts would be loaded on the head of the family when this daughter or sister, in this case, was taken into the harem of Pharaoh. It was part of the way in which Abram became very rich. But, you know, rich people live under an awful handicap.

I know a lot of us would like to try the handicap, but rich people live under a terrible handicap. Don't ever envy them. The handicap that rich people live under is that they haven't any sense of need.

Anything they want, they can get. And they have no sense of need. They don't, therefore, know that they need God.

And that's why our Lord said it's so difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom. He doesn't know he needs to enter into the kingdom. And rich people live under a terrible handicap.

Riches bring their burdens. And here's one of them. Cause conflict between Abram and Lot.

And in the section of Palestine in which they had settled, the pasture land was limited. And their herds were so great that the servants caring for them were fighting over the existing pasture land in the watering hole. And Abram was quick to realize that a conflict that began among the servants wouldn't stop until it came between Abram and Lot.

And he knew that. And I want very quickly to look at the different approach that these two men made to that situation. Abram is now learning to apply the promises of God to the immediate problem that he faces.

Well, let's take the positive first. And we'll look at Abram's approach to the whole thing. And it seems to me there were certain principles that lay behind what he said to Lot and the decision that he made.

And obviously the first principle that lay behind that was unselfishness. Here is the older man making the approach to Lot and saying, now we can't live together here in this tribe this way. It's not right.

And there isn't room to expand because of these tribes already occupying the land around us. So you pick out anywhere you want to go. You go one direction, I'll go the other, but you get the first choice.

Now he must have known Lot. And he must have known that Lot would pick the best. But he gave him the first choice anyhow.

And I think that was unselfish. I never did that as a brother in a family. I'd never do that.

I always got the biggest piece myself. But not Abram. The second principle I see in Abram's decision and the way he talked to Lot is an evaluation of people above things.

He was more concerned about the relationship between himself and Lot than he was about a particular piece of real estate in Palestine. It was more important to him that there be no strife between him and Lot than that he have the best pasture land in Canaan. And he thought more of Lot than he did of his sheep.

Thank God for that. Or the herd, the cattle. But the third principle and the most important one that I see is faith.

How so? How could this man afford to be so generous? What was God promising him and his descendants? Not his nephew. Abram and his descendants. His whole land.

Abram had the whole land of Palestine in his pocket. Why did he care what Lot took? It wasn't going to belong to Lot anyhow. It already belonged to Abram.

Now, Abram wouldn't possess it. Joshua would do that. But it was Abram's and his descendants by title deed rights from the promise of God.

And Nahum Sarna, a Jewish scholar at Brandeis University, made the statement, We Jews have never looked on Palestine as our homeland by right of conquest and aggression, but by right of a title deed from God. I thought that was beautiful. Palestine, he was saying, is not ours because Joshua took it or Moshe Dayan defended it.

Palestine is ours because God gave it to us. That was Abraham's position. So he wasn't worried if Lot took a part of it and took the best part of it.

Abram could relax because God's promise had committed the land to him and to his descendants. Now you see how he was relating the promise of God to his immediate situation. That meant he could relax.

He didn't have to worry about who took what because God had already decided who was going to get what. And that was Abram's faith in God's promise coming down to the immediate situation. And how much I need to do that in my own life.

Bishop Sheen said people who have no eternal security have to scramble for material security. That's why old people get miserly, because they have no eternal security. But the child of God can afford to relax about his possessions and about his own life.

What difference does it make to us if they discover after we're dead a way to lengthen life by 200 years? In this world who wants to live that long anyhow? But what difference does it make to us? Who really cares as far as a Christian is concerned? Aren't we going into the presence of God? Aren't we going into the presence of our Lord Jesus? Or are all his promises meaningless? Why do I have to fight and scramble to build up material security? I'm not saying material security is wrong, but I'm saying when that obsesses me, that's wrong. Hasn't he promised everything I need to serve him? And when he stops providing that need and I die, then my service is finished. That's all.

And the Christian can afford to relax because of the promises of God. And sometimes we act as though going to heaven were the worst possible thing that could happen to us. But Abram is now taking the promises of God and relating them to his own life.

God has promised this land to me and to my descendants. It doesn't matter one quid what lot gets. It's not his, it's mine.

It's the attitude of the Apostle Paul, is having nothing and yet, or possessing nothing and yet having all things. Well he says, the world is yours. Everything.

Life, death, everything, it's all yours. Because it's all in the hands of Jesus Christ. And we are his.

So it's all ours. I'm glad we're not going to possess it until he cleans it up and straightens it out. I don't want it the way it is now.

But wait until he returns in glory and cleans the whole mess up, then I'm ready for it. But right now, who cares? It's all ours anyhow. So I see Abram's face relating the promises of God to his own life.

Lot, poor man on the other hand, was motivated first by selfishness. Me first. Even in that Eastern culture without the proper respect for the elder, Lot should never have taken that first choice.

He should have deferred to the older man. That's Eastern and Biblical culture. But he didn't.

He was wrapped up in himself and that makes a very small package. He was motivated secondly by greed. He wanted what he could see and he wanted it now.

And it seems to me finally he was motivated by confidence, not in God, but in himself. Confident that he could handle the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah. Or else he had no horror of sin.

I don't know which. Maybe both. And you have that solemn note about the wickedness of the people of Sodom and that's where he was going.

But aren't we supposed to be the friends of sinners like our Lord was? Of course. But I think we ought to be careful by what we mean by friendship. Our Lord was the friend of sinners.

But he never drew his emotional security and strength from the sinners. He was always in a position to give to them. He was not dependent on them.

Our problem is we get emotionally dependent and then we cannot stand up and say no. Then we cannot stand up and say this is right and that's wrong. Then we cannot stand up and talk about Jesus Christ.

That is not being a friend of sinners. Genuine friendship, yes. If we're going to be like our Lord.

But our Lord's home base was twofold. First in heaven. That's why he went out early in the morning to pray.

And second in the circle of his disciples. That's where he was at home. And that's where he got his nourishment.

Emotionally and spiritually speaking. In the presence of his Father, in the presence of his disciples. And if we as Christians will get our emotional and spiritual nourishment there, making that our base, then we can move out confidently into the world and make friends of the non-Christians.

But our base is here among the disciples of Jesus Christ. Our dependency is there, not out in the non-Christian world. And we can move easily into the non-Christian world as the friend of sinners because we're anchored firmly in the presence of God and the presence of his people.

But that wasn't love. What were the consequences for love? I think to me the most tragic consequence is that Lot gave up the opportunity to be the friend of the friend of God. I can't think of anything more tragic than that.

He separated himself over a few measly cattle. He separated himself from the friend of God. If his head had been on right, he'd have held on to the friend of God for dear life and let all the cattle go.

The second result in Lot's life was a warning from God. In chapter 14, caught in the war that pitched Sodom and Gomorrah against the cities that held them subservient, Lot was taken captive and all his goods with him, and everything he had seen in the plains of Sodom he lost. It was only temporary.

He was delivered by the man he had abandoned. It was Abram who rescued him. Finally, you know the sordid story of chapters 18 and 19.

And Lot lost everything he had--the possessions he prized so dearly, his wife and his daughters. He lost them morally, and he lost everything that he had. And were it not for the New Testament, I would have said he lost heaven.

But he was a badly scarred, battered sheep that the shepherd finally got into the fold. I don't want to go in that way. And if I don't, I had better start relating the truths of God to my own immediate life situation.

And the only way I demonstrate my trust in God is by my obedience to his word. Let's pray. Our Father, tonight we pray that to whatever degree is possible in our experience, you will make us Abrams and not Lots, and with our stumblings and our failings as Abram had, help us more and more to get hold of your promises, and relate them to our own immediate situations, and make our decisions based not on our natural instincts, not on our cultural values, but based on what you have said, we pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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