

You only sing when you're winning: Psalm 129

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Preacher: Reverend David MacLeod

[0 : 00] Good evening and a warm welcome to the service this evening.

We begin this time of worship by singing to God's praise in Psalm 129, the whole of Psalm 129. Oft did they vex me from my youth, may Israel now declare.

Oft did they vex me from my youth, yet not victorious were. The plowers ploughed upon my back, they long their furrows drew. The righteous Lord did cut the cords of the ungodly crew.

And down to the end of this psalm, we sing all of it to God's praise. Oft did they vex me from my youth, may Israel now declare.

Oft did they vex me from my youth, yet not victorious were.

[1 : 16] The plowers ploughed upon my back, they long their furrows drew.

The righteous Lord did cut the cords of the ungodly crew.

Let science haters all be turned back with confusion.

As grass on houses tops be they, which fades ere it be grown.

Whereof enough to fill his hand, the more cannot find.

[2 : 16] Nor can the man his bosom fill, whose work his sheaves to bind.

Neither say they who do go by, God's blessing on you rest.

We in the name of God the Lord do wish you to be blessed.

Let's unite our hearts in prayer. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, once more we thank you that at the end of this day, this Lord's day, we are able to come to you in prayer.

We thank you that you are the God who has given us the desire. And you are the God who has given us the opportunity, the call, the command even, to come to you. We thank you for the words of Jesus that we so often remember and go to.

[3 : 21] As he says, come to me all who are weary and who are burdened, and I will give you rest.

We thank you that those who wait upon the Lord have the promise that our strength will be renewed.

We thank you that as we draw near to you, as we seek to draw near to you, you're the God who has promised you will not drive us back, but you will take us close. And so we pray that in this time of worship that we would know that you are close to us.

We pray that even though we are physically disconnected from each other, we pray that we would know something of that fellowship, of that connection, that eternal connection that we have when we are in Christ.

We thank you that there is no one and there is nothing that can separate us from the love of Christ. And no one and nothing that can separate us from each other when we are united in that love of Christ.

So enable us, we pray, to know that closeness, to know your presence, to know your peace, and to know your help as we open your word, as we sing your word, and as we meditate upon it.

[4 : 27] And we pray that as we go from here this evening, we would go as those who have been touched by your spirit and changed by your word. So be at work within us, we pray, and enable us to have our eyes fixed upon Jesus and our ears tuned to the voice of Jesus.

We pray for this service, Lord, for us as we gather together in this way. We pray for the youth fellowship also that meets slightly later this evening. We thank you for our young people and for those who take the time and use the gifts that you have given them to teach them your word.

We thank you that even over this period of lockdown, week by week they still have been able to meet and have been meeting through this technology. And we ask, Lord, once more that you would bless them and that you would protect them.

We know that the teenage years especially can be years where there are new influences, there are influences that would seek to draw your young people away from you. And we pray against those. And we ask, Lord, that these young folks you will meet will not only meet with each other, but that they would meet with you, that they would trust you. And, Lord, we ask that they would walk with you all the days of their life.

[5 : 46] We pray for them as they consider the future also. We are conscious that this week past has seen the bringing of exam results.

And we know some will have done well and got what they wanted. Others perhaps may not have done as well as they wanted and may wonder what the future holds. We thank you that you're the God who holds our future.

And you're the God who has promised that as we acknowledge you, that you will direct our path. So we pray for our young people, that you would give them clarity, that you would give them direction as they seek that direction for their lives.

We pray for those who are beginning school for the first time, who may feel nervousness over that. We pray for those who are continuing in their studies and for some who may be preparing to leave home for the first time.

And we ask, Lord, that your hand would be upon each one as we bring them to you in prayer and that they would know that you are their God and that they are your child.

[6 : 50] So hear our prayers for our young people, we ask. We pray also for those who are elderly, for those who are up in years. We pray on for those who are housebound and who have found this period particularly difficult.

We ask that you would comfort them, that you would strengthen them, that they would know your presence with them in the home even now. We pray on for those in the old folks' homes.

We pray for Harris House and for Leverborough. We thank you for the protection from the virus that they have known over these past months. And now as the island opens up much more and we see people from different areas coming to mix with us, we pray that the infection would continue to be held back, that the virus would not come into any of these places.

But Lord, that we would know your protecting hand over us as an island and especially over those who are elderly and those who are particularly vulnerable.

So we ask that you would hear our prayers. We pray for a world that is broken in many ways. We pray for places where there is the most acute suffering.

[8 : 04] We think of the explosion in Beirut in these last few days. We see the pictures on the news. These are people that we do not know, an area that perhaps we've never visited, but we thank you that we can bring them to you and we can bring these people and these situations to you in prayer.

So we pray for those who are suffering. We pray for those who are struggling. We ask that you would bring relief and aid the efforts of those who would seek to bring relief.

And we ask, Lord, that in the difficulty and the darkness of suffering, that there would be some who would look in faith to Jesus, the light of the world. To hear our prayers, enable us, we pray, to look to Christ, to fix our eyes upon him.

Cleanse us from our sin as we acknowledge it. Fill us with your spirit so that we may be enabled to hear your voice and guide us, we pray. We ask this in Jesus' name and for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We'll read now from the psalm that we sang, Psalm 129. A song of ascent.

[9 : 18] May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame.

Amen. May they be like the grass on the roof which withers before it can grow. With it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.

May those who pass by not say the blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. Amen.

And may God give us understanding as we consider his word for a few moments just now. So let's pray again just for a moment as we do so.

Lord, once more we acknowledge that we need your help. Each time we open your word and we pray that we would know your help, that we would know your spirit working in this place, working amongst us, we pray.

[10 : 35] Speak to us, we pray. Open our ears, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen. There's a long time since I've been at a football match.

In fact, there's a long time since anyone's been to watch a football match. But we know even from watching on television that whether we're at the match or we're watching it from a distance, when your team is winning, when the team that you're supporting is making progress, when things are going well, the fans of that team, they sing, they shout, they can be heard.

We can hear the crowd noise. But when things start to go badly for the team, when the game starts to slip away, when the game is being lost, the crowd often goes quiet and the songs and the chants at the end.

And sometimes to rub salt into the wound, the opposing fans of the team that you may be supporting will chant as their team starts to get the upper hand.

You only sing when you're winning. You only sing when you're winning. And the psalmist here, with Psalm 129 open, the psalmist here, he teaches us that God's people, they don't just sing when they're winning.

[12:03] They don't just sing when everything is good. They don't just sing when life is fine. But they sing all of the time. Even when things go bad. Even when they are, verse 1, greatly oppressed.

Even when they're attacked. Even when they seem to be defeated. They, God's people, we, if we are God's people, are to keep on singing.

So let's look at this psalm just for a few minutes this evening. It's a song. You could say it's a song for the hard times. And first of all, before we actually get into the text of the psalm, I want us to consider how they sing.

That takes us to our first point. As we look at this song, this psalm, we see here that this is praise, not performance. It's point number one.

Praise, not performance. And we get that, we see that from the structure of the psalm. It seems that there's a presenter, and the presenter throws out the line.

[13:15] Verse 1. They have greatly oppressed me from my youth, sings, shouts the presenter. And then he encourages all the people, all Israel, to sing along with him. Still in verse 1.

Let all Israel say, or let Israel say, then into verse 2. They have greatly oppressed me from my youth. So that's the structure.

That's the order of things in this song, in this psalm. And it's a familiar way of singing to us. It's not familiar to many people today, but it's a familiar way of singing to us because we recognize it from Gaelic psalm singing.

The line goes out. The presenter throws out the line. And in the congregation, everyone is encouraged to join in and sing.

And that's the point I want us to see as we glance at the first verse, or the first two verses of this psalm. The point to note is that the whole congregation are encouraged to join together in the praise of God.

[14:15] Yes, there's someone giving a lead. Yes, there is someone who strikes that opening note and who raises his voice, but he's a presenter.

He's not a performer. This is not a concert that the psalmist is inviting the people to watch from a distance. This is a gathering together of God's people where they unite their voices, all Israel, in praise.

And I think as we reflect on our own situation, even here as I stand in an empty church, we can say this is something that we've missed, isn't it?

Now that coming together and that uniting of our voices in praise. Even those who are meeting, congregations not far from us, who are meeting physically, still there is that sense of lack because there is no opportunity to come together and worship and to unite their voices in praise.

It's something perhaps that we took for granted until we lost the opportunity to do it. But when we do open back up, God willing, whenever that may be, let's remember every time we stand, every time we raise our voices, we are praising God.

[15:44] And even before we have the opportunity to open back up and meet together, even as we tune in, let's not just watch the psalm and the hymn being sung and come to mind as to how well or how tuneful it's been sung.

Let's not just watch it, but let's sing out this psalm of praise. Let's sing out these hymns of praise. I know we can't hear each other, but God can hear our praise.

It's praise, not performance. I remember being in Gilcompton Church for quite a number of years earlier in my life.

And the minister there at the time was a man called William Still. He's a very musical man, had a very musical background. And he had a great voice, great musical abilities. And at the back of the church, I always remember there was a lady and she had her hymn book and she stood up. And every time she stood up, she sang out at full volume.

[17:00] She was tone deaf. And Mr. Still was well known for not being the most tolerant man. Somebody coughed two or three times in a service, he'd be quick to scold them from the pulpit.

If somebody fidgeted, it would annoy him and he would say it from the pulpit. But this woman, even though every time she stood up to sing, you could hear her above everyone else, even though she was way off key and kind of broke the harmony, the musical harmony of the congregation, he never ever said a word.

He was never ever critical of her. Now why was that? I think it's because he recognised that she was praising the Lord.

And that's the point for us to take here as we approach this psalm. Our singing is praise. It's not performance. So there's a little just about how they sang this psalm and how we are to sing these psalms and hymns, spiritual songs.

Next, what I want us to think about is what they sang. We move from the structure and how they sang to what they actually sang about in the psalm.

[18:16] And it may surprise us to note that they sang about the problems they faced and that's the second point. We move from praise, not performance, to the problems that they faced.

That's what they were singing about. Verse 1 and 2. They have greatly oppressed me from my youth, let Israel say. They have greatly oppressed me from my youth.

Now God's people, at the time that this psalm was penned, they have problems. The commentators aren't agreed as to what the timing was and what the problems were.

It's not clear. But it is clear that they have problems of some sort or another. They are oppressed, as it says in verse 1. They're afflicted, as it says in the King James Version.

And this oppression, it wasn't a fleeting one-off attack, but this was something that they had had to endure from their youth. Likely that was a reference back to Israel's sufferings in Egypt.

[19:17] Isaiah chapter 11, verse 1 says, When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. So likely this reference to my youth is a reference back to captivity in Egypt.

And during these years of captivity, and even ever since these years of captivity, God's people were oppressed. They had long-term, ongoing problems.

I remember working in the past for a summer in the job centre in Inverness.

And I was a student, and I was on the front line for a season, telling people about jobs and trying to arrange interviews. And sometimes people came in to find out about a job, and they were known to be long-term unemployed.

And you could see it in them. They were worn down. They were lacking confidence. They were disillusioned.

[20:24] And that likely was the shape of God's people at times. They were worn down. They were hard-pressed. They were afflicted. We get a sense of that in verses 1 and 2, and the picture becomes even more vivid and real in verse 3.

And again, I think that looks back to that period of captivity in Egypt.

Israel were in slavery. They were made to do hard labour. Their backs would have been whipped by their masters. Their backs would sometimes have been cut and exposed.

And here, that's the picture that's used. God's people, the blades of affliction, the cuts of oppression have gone deep into their backs like a plough cuts deep into the soil.

And so we see here that God's people, they had problems. They faced problems. So what did they do?

[21:34] Well, they sang. And what did they sing about? Did they sing as a means of escape? Did they sing happy songs about happy days as a kind of way of trying to escape from the darkness of their situation at present?

No, they don't sing about happy days. They don't try to escape. They sing about their problems. They tell the Lord in song, in lament about these problems.

And I think this is something that we need to relearn. If you go through a modern hymn book, generally speaking, there's a lot of light.

But there's very little darkness. The popular hymns are songs of victory. But there's very few songs of lament.

And yet we need them. Because we still have problems. And we are taught here to prayerfully, worshipfully, reverently sing out our problems.

[22 : 54] The British people are well known for being people who are encouraged to keep a stiff upper lip. We're encouraged to bottle up our problems.

Now, don't let anybody see them. Don't let anybody hear about them. But God's way for us is to take our problems to Him in praise.

And in prayer, we're to tell the Lord about the problems we face. You know, one hymn that does come to mind that teaches us that is that hymn that we often sing.

What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege we have to carry everything to God in prayer. Dear friends, the spies forsake you.

Take it to the Lord in prayer. And that's what we're encouraged to do in this psalm. We're encouraged to take our problems to the Lord in praise and prayer.

[23 : 58] We have examples of that in the New Testament. Think about John chapter 2. Jesus is at a wedding with His mother and some of the disciples.

And the wine runs out and the family are humiliated. And so what does Mary do? She comes to Jesus and she says, they have no more wine. She takes the problem to Him.

I remember the sisters in John chapter 11. Their brother Lazarus, Jesus' friend, is dying. So what do they do? Well, they send a message to Jesus and it simply says this, the one you love is sick. They take their problem to Him. And for you and for me, do we have fears? Like the disciples did when they were on the boat in the storm, what are we to do?

We're to tell the Lord. Do we have doubts? Like Thomas often did. Well, what are we to do with them? We're not to bury them. We're to take them to the Lord, tell the Lord.

[25 : 12] Are we confused and needing direction? Well, we don't try to chart our own course. We tell the Lord. Do we feel the weight of our sin and our guilt as David did in Psalm 32 and 51?

Well, we take it to the Lord. We tell the Lord about the problems we face. The one we sing out to, the one we tell out to in praise, He is God.

We're quick to tell each other sometimes about our problems. We're quick to head to social media with our problems and yet the people that we head to can do nothing for us often.

But when we take our problems, the problems we face to the Lord, He is able to help. He is able to save. He is able to keep us, to sustain us.

So tell Him about the problems you face. I think that's one of the teachings that we get from this psalm. Praise not performance.

[26 : 26] Problems faced, point two. The third thing here is we see that there are promises that are trusted. Verses one, two, to four.

They have greatly oppressed me from my youth, let Israel say. They have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me. Plymen, verse 3, have plied my back and made their furrows long, but the Lord is righteous.

He has cut me free from the cords of the wicked. I don't know if you remember, maybe three weeks back I think it was, there was one day and there was a fog, a dense fog that just rolled in.

The weather had been good, it had been bright and then almost out of nowhere this dense, thick fog rolled in. It swallowed up the whole landscape in almost no time.

And for a few hours there was just this heavy, eerie fog that swallowed up everything. It's all we could see. But even though that's all we could see with our eyes, we knew that in behind the fog there were the hills and the mountains that surround us.

[27 : 47] We couldn't see them, but we knew they were there, they were just hidden for a period. And our problems at times can be like that fog, they roll in.

Sometimes we see them coming at a distance, sometimes they roll in at a speed that we're disarmed by. And sometimes they're all we can see.

They seem to just swallow up everything around us. And it's at times like that that we need to remember and trust in the promises of God.

Promises that stand firm like the mountains and the hills around us stand firm. Now at this point of writing it seems the psalmist is in the fog of the problems, of the afflictions, of the oppression that he feels.

But in that fog he doesn't forget who God is. He doesn't forget what God has previously done for him. They have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained victory over me. [29 : 04] Plymen have plied my back, they've made their furrows long, but the Lord is righteous. He has cut me free from the cords of the wicked. He sees the problems, but the promises are breaking through and he's taking hold of them.

Now when we face problems and when we feel that oppression, that affliction, these struggles, the devil rushes in.

he tells us God is not righteous. God is not good. God doesn't care for you. Or you wouldn't be in this situation.

You wouldn't be wrestling with these problems. It's what the devil says. But faith is continuing to believe that God is good in that situation.

Faith is continuing to remember what God has done for us in the past as we wrestle with the circumstances of the present and as we face the future.

[30 : 12] Now the psalmist, he could look back to the times when God had freed his people from Egypt. He could look back to the times when God had given them victory over their enemies and he could be encouraged by that.

Now where do we look back to? Where do we go to be reminded that God is righteous, that he is good, that he cares, that he saves?

Well we look back to the cross. We look back to that place where Jesus was oppressed, verse 1, he was greatly oppressed, he was afflicted.

We look back to the cross where Jesus' back was ploughed and the scourging that he took for us, verse 2. Think about Isaiah, as we have that preview of all that Jesus would suffer and that he did suffer on the cross.

Isaiah 56, I offered my back to those who beat me. Isaiah 53, verse 5, with his stripes, we are healed.

[31 : 32] We look back to the cross. We look back to the cross where Jesus died for our sin. We look to the empty tomb where Jesus rose to give us freedom and deliverance and life that's eternal.

will. And when we look back to the cross, we are reminded that every promise of God can be trusted.

That's why we must never lose sight of the cross. As we thought about this morning, we must never lose that clear view of the cross where we see the mercy of God for us and we see the promises of God kept.

Promises trusted. Point three. Point four. Persecution endured. Verse five here.

May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame. Now, Zion was the word that was commonly used to speak about God's people as they went to worship.

[32 : 41] Jerusalem was the city that they were gathered in, but as they ascended Mount Zion, they were going to worship.

And yet, as they came together in worship, they were aware, and the psalmist writes of it, they were aware of those who hated them because of who they were as God's people.

They were aware of the opposition, of the persecution that was triggered triggered by their act of worship.

They endured persecution back then, and we get a sense of that in this psalm. And that persecution, it rages on.

It wasn't just back then, in their youth, and from their youth. It wasn't just something that's Old Testament. It wasn't just something that's in the New Testament church.

[33 : 42] That's a persecution which God's people have experienced, and will experience through the ages. 2 Timothy 3, 3, 12. Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

I was reading the news report from Release International this week, and here's a report from India. 22nd of July, 2020.

And I'll just quote you what was written. 16-year-old Samaru was a promising young pastor who led a tiny church in his village in Odisha.

But Hindu militants resented the fact that Samaru and two other families had turned to Christ a few years ago. They drove out the church as original pastor.

Then when Samaru took over church leadership, they started plotting against him. Recently, extremists dragged Samaru from his house in Kenduk Uda village.

[34 : 56] They took him up to the mountains. Then they stoned him to death. Why? Because he is one who belongs to Jesus.

Because he is one who was committed to praising God. What a short report from China.

The 23rd of July, the day after, there was notification that came through that Chinese officials have been forcing poor Christians to remove crosses and pictures of Jesus in their homes.

Or they face losing their welfare benefits. Persecution, which has been and continues to be endured because of those whose faith is in Christ.

And even in Scotland today, with this proposed hate crime bill that's coming through, we see a legal framework through which persecution could very quickly become something that we have to endure in far greater measure.

[36 : 14] And yet in Psalm 129, we're given a song to sing as we see it coming. persecution endured.

And finally here, the psalmist, he praises, he prays that the progress of God's enemies will be thwarted, progress thwarted.

That's the final thing that we hear the psalmist sing about, that the progress of their enemies and the enemies of God would be thwarted and that those who oppress them would be turned back in shame.

May all who hate Zion, verse 5, be turned back in shame. May they be like grass on a roof which withers before it can grow. With it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.

In these days, just to get a picture of what was in the psalmist's mind's eye. In these days, roofs were flat and they were made of a mixture of mud and mortar and seeds and the wind would be carried and they would land on the roof.

[37 : 32] But because there was no depth of soil, the grass seed would see life but it would wither before it would grow.

It came to nothing, not even a handful. And so the psalmist here, he's saying may God's enemies be like that, may their plans come to nothing.

Verse 8, may those who pass by not say the blessing of the Lord be upon you, we bless you in the name of the Lord. And the psalmist here, he's praising, he's praying out the truth that those who oppose God and his ways would know no blessing.

And that's the truth, if we oppose God and his ways, if we turn away from him and his course, we can expect no blessing. And so that's what the psalmist sings out, that's what he prays out in this psalm.

And I think probably we get a bit squeamish about this. We get a bit uneasy about praying against people and plans, but we shouldn't.

[38 : 47] Not when these people and plans are in opposition to Christ. James Montgomery Boyce says, can it be wrong for us to pray that the efforts of evil persons might be so unsuccessful that in the end there is nothing at all left of their schemes?

Rather, it is the case that we err by being too tolerant and accepting of evil, rather than too firm in our opposition to it.

We see that in the psalm. And perhaps as we contrast it with some of the prayers that we might pray, we notice that perhaps some of our prayers at times, they lack zeal and bite.

Sometimes our prayers are too nice and polite and they're not fervent enough. So what then is the psalmist asking God to do in this song as it closes, in this prayer?

Well, he's not asking God to blast these people off the face of the earth. This is not a vindictive let them all be burned chorus. Rather, what he's asking for is that God would cause their dark plans, the dark plans of God's enemies.

[40 : 13] He's asking that their dark plans would come to nothing. Eveson, the commentator, says, as a prayer, it is not one of personal vindictiveness, but it arises out of a sincere concern for God's cause.

It must be viewed in the light of Psalm 2, which teaches that all who do not submit to God and his anointed will experience divine wrath. God's people, says Eveson, have a duty to pray that all who are engaged in a hate campaign against Zion will be thwarted in their attempts.

So as we take this into 2020 and try to apply this to our own setting and situation, we are taught that when we hear of a Scottish bill that could legalise the persecution of Christians, even here, and potentially silence those who preach that Jesus is the only way, when we hear of plans and efforts to bring in legislation that may even cause us to close our Bibles, people's we should pray that these political plans would wither like grass, and that those who seek with such determination to push that kind of agenda forward would be turned back in shame.

And when we read about those in India, as we've read about, and those in China, and when we read about similar cases in North Korea, or Pakistan, or Eritrea, where we know of people who seek to oppress and persecute God's people, we should pray against that.

We should pray that these plans to persecute would be thwarted. We should pray that the persecutors would be turned back in shame, and we turn in repentance to the Savior that they have been persecuting, as the Apostle Paul did.

[42 : 31] So today, as we finish, as we look around in Scotland, we may feel, we perhaps often feel, as Christians, like we're losing.

We may feel sometimes oppressed, we may feel afflicted, we may feel sometimes intimidated by the culture and environment we find ourselves in.

We may face problems. But the message of Psalm 129 is don't be silenced. Sing out your problems.

Take them to the Lord. And don't be despairing. Hold on to God's promises. And don't be surprised or overwhelmed by persecution when it comes.

peace. And when it does come in some degree, in some measure, don't be too nice. Sing out in opposition.

[43 : 37] Sing against God's enemies. Sing against the devil's schemes. presence. As together, we sing praises to God.

We'll pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this psalm. A psalm perhaps that is not all that familiar to us.

A psalm perhaps that may make us slightly uncomfortable. And yet we thank you that you have given it to us in your word. And we pray that you would teach us and guide us as we reflect upon it. We pray, Lord, as you direct us to against the plans of those who would seek to oppose Christ and the people of Jesus.

We pray against persecution. We pray against legislation. We pray against all those who would seek to shake their fist at Jesus.

[44 : 44] We pray that the kingdom of darkness, as John McSween often prays, we pray that it would be destroyed. And we pray, Lord Jesus, that your kingdom would come and that we would see many more turning in faith to Jesus.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. we pray. We'll close by saying that great hymn, Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.

Glorious things of Thee are spoken, Zion, city of a God, He whose word cannot be broken, formed before His own abode.

On the rock of ages founded, what can't shake thy sure repose?

With salvation's wall surrounded, thou mayst smile at all thy nose.

[46 : 20] See the streams of living waters springing from eternal love.

well supply thy sons and daughters and all fear of want we move.

Who can faint while such a river ever flows the thirst to assuage grace which, like the Lord the giver ever flows from age to age.

saviour, if of Zion's city I through grace remember am, let the world deride your pity, I will glory in thy name.

Fading is the worldling's pleasure all his bolstered pomp and show solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know.

[48 : 24] And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with us all now and forevermore. Amen. Amen.