

Acts 9 (Part 1): 1-19 • A madman becomes a beloved brother

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We're in Acts chapter 9. Open your Bible there, please. Acts 9. This is the beginning of this chapter for us. Let's start with prayer, shall we?

Father, we open our hearts to You this morning in the name of Jesus. And we thank You Lord, for the opportunity to come together to dig into the Word, to worship together, to fellowship, to pray.

We ask in Jesus name that the ministry of your Holy Spirit would be active here today, touching hearts, opening minds and hearts, filling us Lord with everything we need to be nourished and equipped to be into the world this week, shining the love of Christ.

Be with us we pray, minister grace among us, teach us, and guide us. We ask Lord in Jesus name, amen. Amen.

Acts chapter 7, you'll remember, introduced us to a character by the name of Stephen, who eventually, as we read, was murdered by the Jews because of his testimony about the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then we started chapter 8. We saw that it opened with the words that, Saul approved of Stephen's execution and that execution, that murder of Stephen, started a landslide of persecution against the believers. They began to scatter all over the region. Most of the last chapter that we looked at, chapter 8, dealt with that, the beginnings, I guess, of that scattering.

We read about how Philip took the gospel up into Samaria, and there saw an explosion of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and it was all very exciting. We also saw how he was used of the Lord to share the gospel with a particular Ethiopian eunuch who came to Christ and was baptized on the spot, and that was all very cool.

And now we return here in chapter 9, to the source really of the persecution that broke out against the believers. And really it's all coming, most of it is coming from a man named Saul. And in chapter 9, we see that it begins by saying, "*But*

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” (ESV)

There's some interesting things really in just these first 2 verses. First of all, we see that he was asking, Paul was, I should say, he's still Saul at this point, is asking for letters for the synagogue at Damascus, which of course is the Jewish place of worship. Which tells you that at this point in time, the early Christians were still fellowshiping right alongside the Jews, the rest of the Jews, I should say.

And then they, again, I've mentioned this before to you guys, the early Christians didn't see a separation between Christianity and Judaism. There was..., we see that today when people are talking about the different faiths they say, well, there's Judaism and then there's Christianity. The early Christians saw no separation.

They were Jews. They had always been Jews. They had been brought up with the understanding of the God of the Hebrews who prophesied or spoke through the prophets, I should say, of the coming of Messiah. And they just believed the scriptures, related to those prophecies.

And they embraced the Jewish Messiah. And so for them, they were moving on in their Judaism. They didn't see it as Christianity. To them, it wasn't Christianity, it was moving on in Judaism, it was moving on in the faith of the Jews, the God of the Hebrews, the God of the universe.

And so it was the most natural thing in the world for the early Christians to amalgamate their Christian faith along with their Judaism. And that means, they kept the Sabbath, and they went to synagogue, and they did all the things that they ever did.

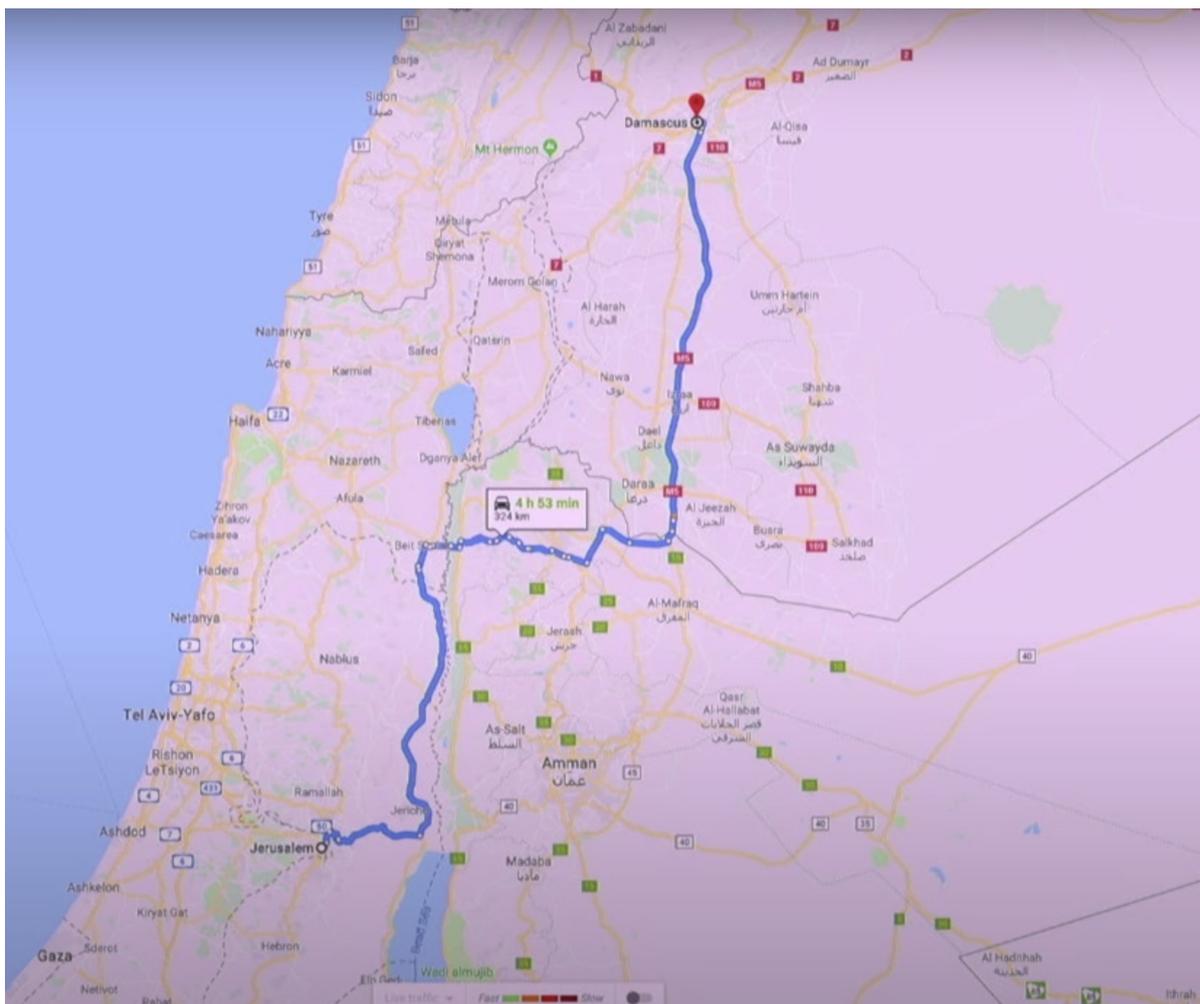
And that's one of the things that causes people today to have such issues with understanding, frankly, the Christians relationship to the law of Moses. Because they'll say, well, the early Christians kept the Sabbath. Why don't we?

Well, the early Christians were Jews and they were just following along in their Judaism. There's nothing different. It was over a period of time that those things began to be recognized. When I say those things, I mean, frankly the elements of the law began to be recognized as fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, just as He said. He said, I've not come to abolish the law, I've come to fulfill it.

(Matthew 5:17) In other words, fill it up. I'm going to show you why all those things were given to you by my Father over the course of all those years and so forth. And anyway, you can see that's what's going on here.

The second thing that I want to make a point about, is that Saul is making his way to Damascus and the reason that's significant is that Damascus was not next door to Jerusalem. And so he's not letting anything limit him from his task of rooting out these Christians, arresting them, bringing them back to Jerusalem, where they will be tried and punished for their belief in this Jesus of Nazareth character.

Let me show you on the screen. I found a map. This is an interesting map because it's more of a modern map. You know what's interesting about modern maps when we look at Bible towns and cities and places? It still the same. It's been 2,000 years and they're still there. What I'm showing you here is basically a route that would have been taken from Jerusalem to Damascus. Damascus is in Syria and this was a long journey.



Oh, you probably can't see it, but this is a Google map and in the very middle of that route there, you might not be able to see it. I have to actually make it go bigger, but it's like 4 and a 1/2. Well, it's 4 hours and 53 minutes by car.

Now imagine that by foot, but that's doesn't, that's not stopping Saul. He doesn't care how far this is, how long it is, and how arduous the journey is. He wants those Christians and they need to be punished.

Because you see, in Saul's mind, what they were doing was treasonous. It was blasphemous and he wanted them gone. He was there approving the death of Stephen and he would have approved the deaths of any others at the same time.

Let's keep reading. Verse 3. *“Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. (oh here we go) ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.””*

Oh, this is so good. But I want you to be careful not to miss a very important statement that is made in this little short exchange between Saul and Jesus and it has to do with Saul being told who he's really persecuting. Because you see, he's out to get these Christians who say they believe in Jesus of Nazareth.

But did you notice that 2 times in this very short exchange, Jesus told him who he really was persecuting First of all, in verse 4, He said, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* And then when Saul asks who is speaking in verse 5, the Lord responds by saying, *“I am Jesus, (look at this) whom you are persecuting.”*

Isn't that interesting? I find that interesting. I find it very interesting. It's interesting that Jesus didn't say, I am Jesus, and you're persecuting my people. Or you're persecuting my church, or you're even persecuting my children, my family. He doesn't say that.

The persecution is personal and it is ultimately toward the Lord Himself. And so that's what He brings out. Here's the question. How should we understand this statement? Because it's a very interesting one. Well, I think we should see it alongside what the man who is being spoken to, Saul, later, the apostle Paul, went on to write about. Because when he got around to writing a letter to a church that was started in Ephesus, he spoke of this dynamic that we're reading

about here in the Book of Acts. Let me put this on the screen. From Ephesians 5:23 it says,

Ephesians 5:23 (ESV)

...Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

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Now, when you see the word, “*head*” there in that verse, I want you to be careful not to think about that as we would say the head of security, all right, that's not what he's talking about. He's actually using the imagery of a human body, just like your human body.

And he is saying that when there is a body, there must be a head and Jesus... We are the body of Christ and He is the head. And again, sure, He has that authority, but that's not all that it means. It means He's connected to the body, right? Just like your head is connected to your body. And just like your body is made up of the torso, and arms, and legs, and mouth, and feet, and all the other things that are connected to it.

You also have a head, of course and we do as the body of Christ, and Jesus is that head. And it's that same imagery that Paul uses when he goes on in another passage here. In chapter 4, he says,

Ephesians 4:15-16 (ESV)

...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him (that's Jesus) who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, (again, we are using the imagery of a human body here) joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

There's that same imagery of a human body. We are the body together, collectively, we are the body, right? We just happen to be the body. Some of the body is in heaven with the Lord. Some of the body is here on earth. You're part of the body that's still on earth and Jesus is in both places. Well, let me ask you a question. When your body gets hurt or when you're sad, or when you feel

pain is your head aware of it? Ha, that's a ridiculous question. Of course. Of course.

But here's the point. He feels what we feel. He is not disconnected and aloof. Sitting up there in heaven and going, well, I'm sure just waiting for the timer to go off so I can go back down there and take care of things and get things back into order.

Meanwhile, we're just going to keep chilling up here in heaven. No, no, no, no. He's connected. He's here. He's involved. He's feeling what you feel. He's feeling what we feel. He's experiencing what we are experiencing. He is not disconnected. He's the head. The head feels everything.

And so what does He say to Saul? *“I am Jesus, (the one) ... you are persecuting.”* It's personal. Changes how we think a little bit, doesn't it?

Now, it goes on to say in verse 7, *“The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”*

Here's Saul, he gets knocked to the ground, blinded, humbled, and then he has to be led into Damascus, so he's obviously not far. He's probably not far from Damascus by this time. And so he's led into Damascus where he goes into the home of a person. And he spends 3 days, 3 days fasting, no food, no drink, no nothing.

Now you'll remember back in verse 6, what the Lord told him was, He said, *“... rise and ... (go into) the city, and you will be told what you ... (should) do.”* It's been 3 days. How long are you good at waiting for direction? I can handle about 3 minutes without getting antsy.

He's on day 3, blind, no food, no drink. I try to imagine what was going on in his heart and mind during those 3 days. Well, we're actually going to find out what he was doing during those 3 days as we read on.

Look at verse 10 and following it says, *“Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul,*

for behold, he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.””

Well, I love this. I mean, I just, this whole narrative makes me smile, but this is where we find out what Saul was doing those 3 days. And the Lord just simply said to Ananias this, “*For behold, he is praying,*” “*...he is praying.*”

Now, I want you to think about the significance of that statement if I could just for a moment, can I? Because I want you to remember something, Saul was not just a Jew, Saul was a very religious Jew. Saul was a man who had been educated at the feet of a man named Gamaliel, a very famous rabbi. Saul was a man who had himself become a rabbi excuse me, well yeah, he was considered a rabbi in a very real sense of the word, but he was most importantly to him, a Pharisee. He's a Pharisee, which is the strictest form of Judaism.

Now, as a Pharisee, I have absolutely no doubt that Saul was there every time the Jews gathered for prayer. And they gathered 3 times a day for prayer; morning, afternoon, and evening prayer.

Here's the point. Saul was no stranger to prayer. He prayed. He prayed a lot. He'd been praying all his life. And yet, you sense, as you read this, there's something different going on, don't you?

As the Lord is speaking to Ananias about what's going on with Saul there's a new something happening. Saul is praying now with a new heart. He's got a completely different perspective about life and about prayer and about the God who he had felt that he was serving with all of his heart. Because now the Lord is saying of Saul, a man who had spent probably his lifetime praying, he's saying now, “*...behold, he is praying.*”

I wonder how many of us, before we knew the Lord, shot up quick prayers whenever we were scared or in need in some particular way. When the moment arose, like we tended, I'm sure to do some of us before really walking with the Lord.

But then I wonder this, I wonder how after we truly bowed the knee and embraced Jesus as our Savior. How God listened and said, behold, he's praying or behold, he's now praying. Because it was now, it was real. It was genuine. It wasn't just a quick, I need like you put a coin in a vending machine. It's now, a relationship of the heart that says, God, I need you. I didn't know, but now I know I need you. Behold, he is praying.

Now, Ananias isn't quite so sure about these marching orders that he's getting from the Lord. Look at verse 13 with me. It says, *“But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this (character) man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.’*” The word had already spread all the way north up to Damascus about what Saul had been doing as it relates to the persecution of the church.

And he goes on to say in verse 14 *“And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, (and I love this, it's just this calm) ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’*”

This is the Lord's declaration of the calling that he has placed upon Saul's life. He says, he's my chosen instrument. How strange that must have sounded to Ananias's ears. Can you imagine, to have been on the receiving end as the body of Christ to so much hurt, and pain, and evil, and persecution, from this man.

And the Lord goes, oh yeah, he's my chosen instrument. He's my chosen instrument. Lord, are we talking about the same guy here? Because we've been hearing about a Saul of Tarsus. Is there another? Is there another Saul of Tarsus? Maybe you got your wires crossed.

There's this guy named Peter down there in Jerusalem. Why don't you just use him? He's good. And there's a bunch of others too. In fact, Jesus picked a bunch of guys. I'm sure any of those will do just fine. This guy is rabid. He's evil. No, no, no. He's my chosen instrument.

I want you to think about that people, because the reason I want you to think about it is because I run into so many Christians who just have the hardest time thinking of God using them for whatever reason. And it could be because they have a past life of sin, or just because they, like Moses, they feel like they have so many limitations, or whatever the issues might be. But people struggle with the idea that God might have a calling upon their life. And we're like, oh, God couldn't use a person like me.

Let me tell you just read through your Bible and you'll see the people that God can use. The people... Paul would actually go on to say, who are the people that God chooses? Are they the strong and mighty and rich and famous and stuff like that? No, no. People that God uses, they're the people that most of the world looks at and goes, well, they don't even look at them. They don't even notice

them because they're the nobodies, the nothings. Those are the people God uses, people like you and me.

Well, you might have noticed that the Lord also said something else to Ananias about Saul, and that was, He said, I'm going “*to show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*”

And during Paul's life on earth, he was continually shown how much he must suffer for the name of Jesus. It's interesting, when Paul was writing his letter to the Galatians, it was a hard letter to write, a very hard letter. It was corrective, and it was confrontational. And I bet it was even harder for the people of Galatia to read it because, they basically got spanked. I mean, it was Paul spanking the church and confronting them with their propensity to run off after false teachers and begin even to embrace a false gospel.

And so he has had some really hard things, but what I really find interesting is how he ended that letter. I want you to look at it on the screen from Galatians 6, 17. Listen to this. Listen to this.

Galatians 6:17 (ESV)

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

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Boom. That's called, well, it's what Paul referred to as his scars of authenticity. And that's the way he looked at it. He looked at his suffering and the scars that came from that suffering is literally a badge of authenticity. Don't let anybody bother me, “*I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*” In other words, the sufferings that I have borne for the name of Jesus. And he said, spoke about those sufferings. Here's where we get to 2 Corinthians and he begins to talk and he says,

2 Corinthians 11:23-27

...imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

...imprisonments, (you name it) with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

I bear on my body, the marks of Jesus. It got to the point where when Paul spoke of his ministry, he would speak of persecution as if they were essentially one in the same thing, ministry and persecution ministry. Ministry, persecution, he didn't see a difference. Let me show you this interesting statement from 1 Corinthians chapter 16. He says,

1 Corinthians 16:9 (ESV)

...a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

...a wide door for effective work has opened to me, (that's ministry) and there are many adversaries. (that's persecution)

It was all one statement. It was all a single statement for Paul. Ministry, persecution goes together, goes together. It's the way he saw it. He didn't expect one without the other.

Verse 17, look with me in your Bible. *“So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, ...”* Notice what he says to Saul, this is the enemy. This is the evil enemy and he calls him, *“Brother Saul.”* That's a Christian term, they would use that for those who were in the faith.

“Brother Saul, (he says) the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” That's the baptism of the Holy Spirit by the way. And verse 18 says, *“And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.”*

By the way, it says *“scales fell from his eyes.”* This is just my personal belief. It's just my opinion, okay? But when Paul later wrote to the Corinthians in his second letter, and he talked about a thorn in the flesh, it is my personal opinion,

it was a disease of the eyes. Because he actually said to the Galatians, he says, it was because of an illness that I came to you in the first place. And he says, you received me like you would receive God himself. In fact, he says, I know that had you been able, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

And then later in some of his letters, when he would end the letter, Paul dictated his letters. But he would always write the last line in his own hand because that was his sign of authenticity that it was really from Paul. And he would say at the end of his letter, see what large letters I use as I write with my own hand.

I think Paul had a disease of the eyes. I don't think Paul ever got over that issue of being blinded by the Lord on the road to Damascus and it was a reminder. And that's what Paul called it.

He said, in order to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations, there was given unto me a thorn in the flesh to, in other words, to keep my feet on the ground.

It's like Paul, remember that you were Saul of Tarsus and you were on your way to destroy my church, and I changed you in the blink of an eye, and you became the apostle Paul. And so thus begins the death of one man and the new life of another.

Because we read there in the end of verse 18 that, "*Then he rose and was baptized;*" And what we see there is that Paul submitted to water baptism as a way of signifying the death of the old life and the raising up of the new life. And that's what water baptism symbolizes. I hope you know, it's not just getting dunked. It's not just getting wet. It's not just going through the motions.

It signifies the death of the old life and the beginning of the new, because we lay back in the water, death in the water, burial up out of the water, resurrection. But it's resurrection unto new life today, living a new life today. It's the old man, the old woman saying, you're down, you're dead, I have come to Jesus. And, Paul and you guys remember the famous Romans chapter 6, we'll get to it eventually.

Paul's going to say, don't you know that we were baptized into his death? Don't you know that? The old man, the old woman died. We left it behind and the symbolism of baptism is that we've been raised up, washed clean, now ready to live a new life. The reason I share a little bit of that with you is not just to tell

you about what it meant to Paul, but just to also let you know that you probably noticed the tank over here.

In second service, we have 19 people we're baptizing, 19. And some of them are older than me. Praise the Lord, which just thrills me. I'll tell you, but for those of you that can't stick around for second service and it's going to be full. Let me just tell you, you might consider, if you've got to go home and do something, go home and turn on your computer or your TV and watch on YouTube and watch us baptize 19 people in second service.

It's going to be fun. Because what's going on is that for 19 people, they're going through that depiction of the death of the old life and the rising up of the new. I sometimes wish that we could do what happened in the past to the apostle Paul. I wish we could give people a new name once they get baptized, once they come to the Lord, wouldn't that be cool? Just to signify the fact that the old one's dead now you got a new name.

Well, the Bible says we actually are going to get a new name in the Book of Revelation. It says we'll be given a new name so it'd be cool if we had it now, but I guess I'll wait. I'm not like I said, I'm not good at waiting, but anyway, let's stand and we'll pray.

If you need prayer, of course you are more than welcome to come down and we'd love to pray with you.

Father, thank You so much for Your Word. Thank You for the beauty of Your Word. Thank You for the blessing of being able to sit under You, Lord, our teacher, our instructor, the nourisher of our soul.

And we praise You and we thank You for the good things that You're doing in all of our lives.

And we just open our hearts to You that the ministry of your grace would continue to fill us as we look to You to accomplish that very thing.

We ask it all in the name of Jesus, our savior and all God's people said, amen.

God bless you.

Have a good rest of your Sunday.