

Plagues, Pestilences & Pandemics

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Preacher: Rev. Murdo M Campbell

[0 : 00] Well, if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. In the book of Exodus, Exodus chapter 9.

Exodus chapter 9, and we'll just read again from the beginning. Then the Lord said to Moses, Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me.

As you know from history, plagues, pestilences, and pandemics have raged and ravaged humanity for thousands of years. In fact, when we look at this passage, historians have worked out that these plagues in Egypt, they took place over three and a half thousand years ago.

And they've even dated it to a particular year, 1446 BC. But even since then, numerous plagues, pestilences, and pandemics, they have been recorded throughout history.

There was the plague of Athens in 430 BC, which caused the deaths of 100,000 people. There was also the Antonin plague, which lasted 15 years, from 165 to 180 AD.

[1 : 29] It was when the Roman army, they returned home. They had been up in Europe battling, and then they returned home to home camp. But what they brought back with them was more than the spoils.

They brought back a plague of smallpox, which wiped out most of the Roman army and caused the deaths of about 5 million people within the Roman Empire.

In fact, the Antonin plague, it was a crucial factor in the fall of Rome and also the rise and spread of Christianity throughout Europe.

There was also the bubonic plague, also known to us as the Black Death. It began in the 14th century, but its effects were still being felt three centuries later, 300 years later.

What's remarkable is that the Black Death, as it spread throughout Europe, the Reformation followed behind it. Because the Black Plague, it was the means of many people turning away from sin and turning to salvation in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

[2 : 31] There was also the flu pandemic in the 19th century, with over 1 million people dying. And as we've heard, I'm sure you've heard of them, the polio epidemic, the Ebola epidemic.

There was the Asian flu. There was swine flu. There was also the Spanish flu. The Spanish flu, it appeared towards the end of the First World War in 1918. And it caused this global pandemic, and it's thought to have affected one third of this world's population, causing over 50 million deaths. It's been known as the world's deadliest pandemic in modern history. Much more deadly than COVID-19, especially because they didn't produce a vaccine until much later.

So we have an efficient and an effective vaccine for our current pandemic. But you know, friends, history reminds us and reaffirms to us that plagues, pestilences, and pandemics, they have raged and ravaged humanity for thousands of years.

But of course, the question which plagues and pestilences and pandemics often raises is why? Why?

[3 : 45] Why does the Lord allow these things to happen? Now, I want to say this morning very carefully, very cautiously, and I hope very compassionately.

Because the thing is, the Lord allows painful providences to come into our personal lives. Not to drive us away from Him, but always to drive us to Him.

But what we see here with Pharaoh is that he hardened his heart.

The Lord was speaking to him. The Lord was speaking into his personal life. And yet he hardened his heart. He blamed the Lord for the painful and personal providences in his life.

And so I'd like us to think about this chapter this morning under three headings. Three personal headings. A personal pestilence. A personal pandemic. And then a personal plague.

[5 : 00] A personal pestilence. A personal pandemic. And a personal plague. So first of all, we see a personal pestilence. A personal pestilence.

We see that in verse one. Then the Lord said to Moses, go into Pharaoh and say to him, thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, let my people go that they may serve me. For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, behold, the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague or pestilence upon your livestock that are in the field.

The horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. Now, as you know, the ten plagues of Egypt, they are literally, as we've said before, the ten blows in Egypt.

They are in the sense of coming to blows with God. Going ten rounds with God. But as we said, this clash and this conflict, it wasn't between Moses and Pharaoh.

The clash and the conflict was between those who were standing in their corner. Because in Moses' corner, he had the strength and support of the Lord. The covenant and creator God of Israel.

[6 : 09] But in Pharaoh's corner, he had the gods of Egypt on his side. And with these ten plagues, these ten blows, there was going to be a clash and a conflict between Israel's champion and Egypt's champion.

And in round one of this conflict, we saw that the Lord delivered his first blow to Happy, the Egyptian god of the River Nile. And the Lord made Happy unhappy when he turned the River Nile into blood.

Then in round two, we saw that the Lord embarrassed and exposed the Egyptian frog-headed goddess Heket by plaguing Egypt with frogs.

Then in round three, the Lord took a swing at Seth, the Egyptian aardvark god of the desert. And he did so by raising fleas from the desert. And he did it, as we read, with only his finger.

Then in round four, the Lord undermined Uachit, the goddess of flies. And he did so by sending swarms of swarms of swarms of flies.

[7 : 14] Where the flies, they filled the air and they crawled and covered the ground. And you know, all these plagues in Egypt, these blows in Egypt, they're all demonstrations, they're all declarations of the Lord's power in comparison to the impotence and the ineffectiveness of the gods of Egypt.

But of course, the question is, how did Pharaoh react? How did the king of Egypt respond when the Lord defeated all these dead gods? And what we read throughout the narrative is that regardless of the fact that Happy and Heket and Seth and Uachit were all proven to be powerless Egyptian gods, none of it deterred or discouraged Pharaoh.

None of it caused Pharaoh to submit or to surrender his life to the Lord. None of it made him see that the Lord was speaking directly and personally into his life.

And as Solomon says, like a dog that returns to its vomit, Pharaoh returned to his folly. Pharaoh hardened his heart by stubbornly refusing, resisting and rejecting the Lord.

But the Lord wasn't done with Pharaoh. In the fifth round, the Lord commands Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh once again. And they go with the same message and the same mission.

[8 : 44] Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let my people go. And you know, I think that as servants of the Lord, Moses and Aaron, they would have been forgiven for getting fed up with Pharaoh.

They would have been forgiven for getting fed up with Pharaoh. Because this was now the fifth time that Pharaoh had heard the sermon and the summons of Moses. This was the fifth time that Pharaoh had heard Moses preach with persistence and passion and power.

This was the fifth time that Pharaoh had heard the call and the command of the Lord, let my people go. And yet Pharaoh, he stubbornly refused, resisted and rejected the Lord.

This is round five. And you know, my unconverted friend, you know, you might look at Pharaoh here and think, well, if I was Pharaoh, I would listen to the Lord.

If I was seeing all this happening in my backyard, I'd listen, I'd submit and surrender my life to the Lord. I'd seek the Lord. I'd seek forgiveness from the Lord.

[9 : 59] But the thing is, I don't know what round you're on, but you've heard far more sermons than Pharaoh. You've heard the gospel preached to you more times than Pharaoh did.

You've received the call and the command of the Lord more often than Pharaoh did. You've sat in church here or online at home more than five times.

In your life. This is the fifth round for Pharaoh. The fifth time the Lord had spoken into his life. But this isn't your fifth round.

I wonder what round you're on. You've heard the Lord speak into your life more than five times. And you know, I was thinking this week, well, maybe if Pharaoh was you, maybe if Pharaoh had heard the gospel as often as you have, maybe he would have submitted and surrendered his life to the Lord.

The point is, my friend, you've heard this message so many times. Is it not about time you did something about it?

[11 : 14] You've heard it so often. Is it not about time you did something about it? That you would surrender and submit your life to the Lord.

And so as Pharaoh, as he steps into the ring for round five, the Lord comes to blows with Apis, the sacred bull of Egypt.

Apis, the sacred bull of Egypt. And I'm sure you've probably seen pictures of this sacred bull. It's often depicted and described as a black bull with white markings.

And the Egyptians thought that these white markings on this black bull, they symbolized the presence of God within the bull. They viewed the bull as divine.

They saw the Apis bull as not only divine, they viewed it as royalty. It was revered and respected by all the Egyptians. They worshipped this sacred bull, the Apis bull.

[12 : 15] But as we're told, the hand of the Lord, the hand of the Lord brought a severe pestilence on the land. And look, notice, no longer, it's not any longer the finger of the Lord.

We saw that last week. It's now the fist. The Lord is taking this seriously. He's brought a severe pestilence upon all the livestock in the field.

The horses, the donkeys, the cattle, the camels, and the sheep. And it was, you know, it was a personal pestilence because it was only the livestock of Egypt that were affected.

The livestock in Israel, they were protected from this pestilence. But all the livestock in Egypt were told they died, which not only affected their worship, it also affected their wages.

It affected their wages because, well, as many of you will know, if you have livestock, you know that livestock are worth a lot of money. And so to lose an animal, it's a costly business.

[13 : 15] But to lose all your livestock in a moment, it would have been a devastating disaster for homes, the homes and families in Egypt. And, you know, as an owner of livestock, you know, there's nothing more devastating.

I remember having to do it a few times myself. There's nothing more devastating than having to bury a dead animal, but even more so to bury all your animals in a mass grave.

You know, it's said that foot and mouth is the world's worst animal pestilence. And I'm sure that many of you remember the foot and mouth pandemic or epidemic that spread across the UK in 2001.

And we saw all these scenes. I'm sure you remember them. These scenes of animals being buried or burned. And, you know, the solemn message for Pharaoh in this plague was, never put your livestock before the Lord.

Never put your livestock before the Lord. The Lord is reminding Pharaoh. He's reminding us, put the Lord first in everything. Put the Lord first in everything.

[14 : 30] And yet what we read at the end of this plague is, Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh hardened his heart. And so a personal pestilence then progresses on to a personal pandemic.

That's what we see secondly. A personal pandemic. Look at verse 8. We're told that the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Take handfuls of soot from the kiln and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh.

It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt and become boils, breaking out in sores on man and beast. throughout all the land of Egypt.

You know, you would have thought by now that by now Pharaoh would have submitted and surrendered his life to the Lord. But no. Pharaoh was still stubbornly refusing and resisting and rejecting the Lord.

And now having encountered and experienced a personal pestilence in all these animals dying, things begin to get even more personal. with a personal pandemic.

[15 : 41] And as you know, we're very familiar with the word pandemic. It refers to a disease which is prevalent throughout a whole country, or indeed the world. But in Egypt, it was a personal

pandemic because it was once again confined to the Egyptians.

And because it was such a personal pandemic, it was a hard blow to the Egyptians. It was first and foremost a hard blow against the goddess. Another god.

This goddess called Sekhmet, the goddess of healing. Sekhmet, the goddess of healing. Sekhmet was an Egyptian goddess depicted and described as a fierce lioness.

She was a fierce lioness. In fact, Sekhmet was considered by the Egyptians to be this personal protector of the Pharaoh. She would protect the Pharaoh not only in life, but also in death and into the afterlife.

And yet what we see in this personal pandemic in Egypt is that Sekhmet was anything but a personal protector of the Pharaoh or his people because Sekhmet was a powerless protector against this personal pandemic.

[16:50] And even Pharaoh's magicians, we read there that they conceded, verse 11, the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils. For the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians.

So even the Pharaoh's magicians, they concede and they confess that this is too much for them.

But you know, the thing about this personal pandemic is that it wasn't life-threatening.

It was certainly personal and painful being struck down with these boils, but it wasn't dangerous. It wasn't deadly. And yet these painful and, we'll say, pus-filled boils, they were a huge blow to the Egyptians.

And they were a blow to the Egyptians. Can you imagine being covered in boils, pus-filled boils? You wouldn't want your face to be seen in public.

You wouldn't want to go outside the house. And that was a huge blow to the Egyptians because they prided themselves in their appearance. I'm sure you've seen pictures of Egyptians like Cleopatra, where the Egyptians, they're often clothed in fine linen.

[18:05] They wore lots of gold jewelry. They had bright colors. They had precious stones on these bits of jewelry. Even men and women, they had earrings and bracelets and rings and necklaces and neck colors.

They wore makeup. They did their fingernails. They painted their nails. They had henna tattoos on their body. Nothing wrong with any of these things, but the Egyptians prided themselves in their appearance.

So when this plague of boils appeared, they didn't want to be seen. They didn't want to be seen. They prided themselves in their appearance.

And you know, that's always a danger, isn't it? When you pride yourself in your appearance. And as you know, in the day and age we live in, people are obsessed with their appearance. They're obsessed with the way they look and the way, how they dress and how they're perceived by other people.

And we could say that social media has a lot to do with it. It has made people so body conscious and image conscious and even self conscious.

[19:12] And yet the Bible reminds us the Lord doesn't look on the outward appearance. The Lord looks on the heart. The Lord doesn't look on the outward appearance.

The Lord looks on our heart. And my friend, what does the Lord see when He looks at your heart?

And my heart. What does the Lord see when He looks at your heart?

And my heart? Is it a heart that needs Jesus? Or knows Jesus? Is it a heart that needs Jesus? Or knows Jesus? But you know, with these painful and pus-filled boils, we're told that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Not that the Lord made Pharaoh unable to respond. But that the Lord made Pharaoh's life hard by bringing a personal pandemic into His life. And as we said earlier, the question which plagues and pestilences and pandemics often raise is the question, why?

Why does the Lord allow these things to happen? Why does He bring it into our lives? Why did the Lord allow the COVID-19 pandemic to happen? And as I said, and I want to say this very carefully and cautiously and I hope compassionately, the Lord allows painful providences to come into our personal lives, not to drive us away from Him, but to drive us to Him.

[20:40] The Lord speaks into our lives, into our circumstances and into our situations. And He allows painful providences to come into our personal lives, never to drive us away from Him, but always to drive us to Him.

And as you know, the word providence, when we speak about providence, we mean that God saw it beforehand. He saw it beforehand, which means that our lives, they are not the result of luck or chance or fate or fortune or karma.

No, God in His providence, He has seen everything take place in our lives from beginning to end. And I know maybe for you, you question why.

Why me? Why my family? Why now? Why this way? Why this sickness? Why this suffering? Why this sorrow? Which is completely understandable.

In fact, I think it's good to question why. But you know, when you question why, I would always encourage you to come back to the Lord's personal promise in Isaiah 55, where He says, My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts.

[22 : 02] His ways are far above our ways. His thoughts are far above our thoughts. And as you know, my friend, it's the Lord who writes the narrative of our lives.

He writes, He's the author of the story. He's the author of the story of your life. He's the director in the drama. We might not understand the storyline. We might not foresee all the twists and the turns. We might not understand the chapters that He's written in the narrative. But He's the one who turns the pages in the story of our life. And the thing is, in all that we go through in our life, He's there. He's there in the story with you. And whether we can see Him or not at the time, the assurance of God's Word is that He's working it all together by His grace for our good and to His glory.

He's working it all together by His grace for our good and to His glory. You know, the hymn writer William Cowper, he wrote about the providence of God in his own life.

[23 : 13] He was a man who suffered majorly with depression. And he wrote, God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.

My friend, you may look at your personal and painful providences in your life and things that you've encountered and experienced and even endured for maybe years. But I hope and pray that you can see and that you can say today, had the Lord not brought that into my life, I would maybe have never come to church.

I would maybe have never opened my Bible. I wouldn't have cried to the Lord in prayer for help. Had it not been this way, had it not been this path and this purpose, I wouldn't have learned about the Lord's love for me and my family.

I wouldn't have discovered the strength and the sustaining grace. In all that I've been through, I wouldn't have known His help and His healing and His care and His keeping.

And again, I say this very, very carefully and very cautiously and I hope and I pray very compassionately. The Lord allows painful providences to come into our personal lives, my friend, not to drive you away from Him, but always to drive you to Him, that you would come to Him.

[24 : 44] And as it says in the Bible, to cast all your cares upon Him. Why? Because He cares for you. This is the wonder of it all.

He cares for you and He calls you to seek Him and to search for Him and to find shelter and salvation in Him. But you know, sadly, that's not how people view it.

Just like Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardened his heart. He blamed the Lord. He blamed the Lord for all the painful and the personal providences in his life.

He blamed the Lord and yet the Lord still spoke to him. The Lord spoke into His personal providences and He speaks as we see lastly and briefly, a personal plague.

So there's a personal pestilence, a personal pandemic and then a personal plague. Look at verse 13. Then the Lord said to Moses, Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, Let my people go that they may serve me.

[25 : 59] For this time I will send all my plagues on you, yourself, and your servants, and your people so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.

For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, but you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up to show you my power so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

You're still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall as such as has never been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now.

You know, last year, on Tuesday the 20th of July 2021, during what was a heat wave in England, there was a massive hail storm in Leicestershire.

It smashed windows, it destroyed conservatories, it wrote off cars, it caused panic within the community because these golf ball sized hailstones began to fall from the sky.

[27 : 10] One eyewitness said, one minute the kids were playing with their friends in the paddling pool, the next minute huge lumps of hail came thundering down. It was terrifying.

But you know, the amazing thing is that isn't an isolated incident because huge hailstorms have been reported throughout the world with hailstorms and hailstones the size of tennis balls falling from the sky.

But when you look it up, on the 23rd of July 2010 in South Dakota in the US, the largest hailstorm was ever recorded because the hailstones were told they were eight inches in diameter.

they were the size of bowling balls falling from the sky. And as you can imagine, a bowling ball falling from the sky and lots of them, it would have caused untold damage.

In fact, when you look up some of the hailstorms, you see that they caused huge amount of, such a huge amount of damage that it had an impact upon the economy. They caused billions of pounds worth of damage.

[28 : 23] Now transfer all that into Exodus chapter 9. But in Exodus chapter 9, we're told that there weren't just large hailstones of ice falling. There were large hailstones of fire falling too.

We're told in verse 23, you look at verse 23, Then Moses stretched out his staff towards heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran to the earth, and the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt.

There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.

Now this personal plague on Egypt, it was a blow to another god. The Egyptian goddess, Newt. The Egyptian goddess, Newt, she was the goddess of the sky.

And Newt, she's described and she's depicted in images as having a water pot upon her head because the goddess of the sky, Newt, she was said to shower from her water pot.

[29 : 31] She was to shower blessings and benefits from the sky upon all the Egyptians. And yet, when the Egyptians looked into the sky, all they could see was hailstones of ice and fire falling from the sky.

They couldn't see Newt's promised blessings and benefits. All they could see was the blows that Newt was receiving for being an ineffective and impotent god.

But of course, we have to look at the passage. How does Pharaoh react? How does Pharaoh react when the Lord defeats yet another god in Egypt? And we look at verse 27.

Look at verse 27. It says, Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron and said to him, This time, listen to it, I have sinned. The Lord is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong.

Plead with the Lord for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail. I will let you go and you shall stay no longer. And you know, you read those verses and you think, wow, wow, wow, wow.

[30 : 41] Is Pharaoh's heart finally softening? Is Pharaoh finally submitting to the Lord? Is he finally surrendering to the Lord? Is he bowing his knee to the Lord? Is this the change we've been looking and hoping and waiting for all this time?

And then you read in verse 34. After everything had stopped, when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.

So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he did not let the people of Israel go just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

And what we see is that Pharaoh showed remorse but not repentance. Pharaoh showed remorse but not repentance.

Remorse is just feeling sorry for sin. Remorse is knowing you've done something wrong. Remorse is sorry that you got caught or sorry that you were found out.

[31 : 47] But that's as far as it goes. Repentance is when you turn away from your sin and you turn to the Savior. Repentance is all about turning around.

It's turning away from sin and turning to the Savior seeking forgiveness. And as you know my friend, that's the call of the gospel because as sinners, Jesus says, repent and believe in the gospel.

Repent and believe in the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Turn away from your sin says Jesus and turn to salvation.

Turn away from sin and turn to salvation. Repent and believe in the gospel. and yet what we see here is that Pharaoh hardened his heart.

You know, they're the most solemn words in Scripture, aren't they? Pharaoh hardened his heart. But this is now the end of the seventh plague. His opportunities for repentance are now running out. [32 : 59] He's hardened his heart again and his opportunity for repentance is running out. In fact, what Pharaoh didn't know is that he only had three opportunities, three opportunities of repentance left.

He only had three opportunities left. Now, you apply it to yourself, my unconverted friend. Your opportunities for repentance are running out.

You've wasted many of them. I don't know how many you've got left. You don't know how many you've got left. You might be like Pharaoh, only three. But there's one thing for sure, your opportunities for coming to Christ are getting fewer and fewer.

Your opportunities are getting fewer and fewer. And I don't know, and you don't know, when it will be your last. Therefore, is it not about time? Is it not about time that you learned from the mistakes of this man Pharaoh, and you submitted and you surrendered your life to the Lord?

Is it not about time that you gave up and surrendered your life to Jesus? Is it not about time?

[34 : 22] because, my friend, you just do not know when you will be given your last opportunity.

And I don't need to remind you, because we have been reminded by Providence all the time, that life is uncertain, death is sure, sin is the cause, Christ is the cure.

Don't waste your opportunities. You seek the Lord, you surrender your life to the Lord, you submit everything to Jesus, because, my friend, the truth is, He is speaking into your life and into my life today.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to Thee for speaking into our lives.

We thank Thee, Lord, that Thee are one who speaks into our lives with Thy word, reminding us of the great and precious promises that are found therein. But we give thanks, Lord, that even Thee are a God who speaks into our lives through providence, and sometimes painful providence.

But, Lord, we pray that we would know that it is a tender voice that is calling us. It is the voice of the shepherd calling us to come and to follow him, because as the shepherd says, my sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me, and I give to them eternal life and they will never perish, neither shall they be plucked out of my hand.

[36 : 03] O Lord, we ask that when we are being spoken to, that we would have ears to hear, that we would have eyes to see, that we would have hearts that would understand the wonder and glory of who thou art.

speak to us then, we pray, what you over us we plead, lead us and guide us by thy truth, for we ask it in Jesus' name, and for his sake, amen.

Well, we're going to bring our service to a conclusion this morning by singing in Psalm 105. Psalm 105, it's in the Sing Psalms version on page 139.

Psalm 105, we're singing from verse 23 down to the verse marked 38. Psalm 105 at verse 23, page 139, then Israel came down into Egypt to stay in Ham's land to sojourn for many a day.

The Lord caused his people to prosper and grow, and so they were seen as a threat to their foe. He turned the Egyptians against Israel and caused them to plot his own servants to kill.

[37 : 19] Then Moses and Aaron his chosen he sent, performing his wonders to Egypt they went. So Psalm 105 from verse 23 down to the verse marked 38, and we'll stand to sing if you're able, to God's praise.

Then Israel came down to Egypt to stay in Ham's land to sojourn for many a day.

The Lord got his people to prosper and grow, and so they were saved and suffered to their foe. and so they turned the Egyptians against Israel and caused them to plot his own servants to care.

Then Moses and Aaron is chosen he said, where holy his mother to Egypt they went.

[38 : 47] Because the Egyptians despised his command, he sent a third darkness to cover the land.

their waters and rivers be turned into blood, the fish of the night were destroyed by the Lord.

Their land tinged with boats which invaded their wounds, as words warmed of lights and of natural levels.

The rainy came hail and the lightning boats flashed, each struck down their eyes and their victories were smashed.

He spoke and the locusts and grass stoppers came, and every great thing all swore to last by flame, and then he took vengeance on all the firstborn, the firstfruits of man and root of Egypt were gone.

[40 : 30] He brought his children gaining silver and gold, their tribes all marched forward, most devoutly and whole.

Then Egypt was joyful to see them depart, for teller of them had laid hold of their heart.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forever more. Amen.