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Preacher: Neil Stewart

[0 : 00] Now, as Christian people, as we worship God, we echo that prayer that we be led to the cross by the Spirit. And especially as we approach Easter time, we want our minds focused on what it is we remember at Easter.

Not just the events of Easter, but their significance for us. Just what Jesus achieved at the cross, what happened at the cross and the resurrection and why it's so important to all. How it affects everything we do as Christians. And there's no clearer passage in the Old Testament as to what was happening at the cross than we find in our passage read to us earlier from the book of Isaiah.

And what I want to do today is to spend this morning and this evening looking into this familiar passage that we might understand. And we might, by the Spirit of God, be led to the cross and see what Jesus has done for us.

That we might be moved to worship. That we might be moved to understand why people like C.T. Studd said, If Jesus Christ be the Son of God and died for me, nothing is too great for me to do for him.

[1 : 16] What is it about the cross that makes people say that? Why is it that Isaac Watts could say, Love is so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isn't that just an example of enthusiasm, of being eccentric and over the top and fanatical? If we've understood the cross, we'll say no.

That's our heart response to what Jesus has done. And if you're not a Christian here this morning, you might be thinking, Well, what is it about the cross? Why is it that all these people talk about the cross and sing about the cross?

Well, this morning as we come to this passage, God willing, you'll be able to see by the Spirit of God something of the meaning and the import of the cross. And you might be able to believe yourself and know why Christians sing never further than the cross.

The cross is everything. With the resurrection, it's the heart of our faith. Now, the text out of context is a pretext. You can't just lift Isaiah 52 and 53 out of the book of Isaiah and out of the historical context in which we find it.

[2 : 26] It's found in what's called the book of Comfort, chapters 40 to 66 of the book of Isaiah, written to encourage the people of God. Judgment is going to fall.

The northern kingdom, the ten tribes, have already been taken off into exile. Judah is going to fall in about a hundred years' time. They're going to go the same way in spite of Isaiah's warnings and pleadings with them and then later on Jeremiah's pleadings.

The people of God, because of their idolatry, will go into the world and will go into exile. But that does not mean that God's promises come to an end. And from chapter 40 to chapter 66, Isaiah is given this glorious vision of the salvation that God will bring to his people.

He will bring them back from the exile. In a second exorcist, he will bring them back and he will bless them and Zion will be established and all the nations of the earth will come to worship God. Now, it's not fulfilled when the people come back from exile. It's fulfilled through the life and the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and ultimately at the end of the age.

[3 : 34] But part of this glorious vision is this figure of the servant. What we have this morning in chapters 52 and 53 is the fourth of four songs concerning the servant.

A figure whom the Lord identifies, who will do what Israel should. In the book of Isaiah, in the Old Testament, Isaiah is the servant of the Lord as the prophet.

The people of God, Israel, is classed as the servant. Cyrus, a Persian king who is yet to even be born, he's identified clearly as a servant whom God's going to use.

But then you have it all drawn together in this fourth servant song to point to a person beyond Isaiah, beyond the people of God, Israel, beyond even Cyrus. Because Cyrus can't be said to have done the things that are said to happen in chapters 52 and 53. What you have is this, the focus of God's vision, the focus of God's promise of deliverance, of God's promise of salvation, focusing down to the suffering of one individual.

[4 : 48] And our attention is called to him. What I want to do this morning is look at the first two stanzas of this glorious passage. It's like a poem. There's five distinct stanzas.

There's chapter 52, 13 to the end of that chapter, chapter 53, 1 to 3, 4 to 6, 7 to 9 and 10 to 12. And what I want to do is this morning look at the first two and then this evening look at the second two. The first one begins with this call. It begins with a startling announcement.

See, or better still, behold my servant. Not just see as in glance at and look, but behold. The Hebrew word *hinna* means to consider.

God here is through the prophet calling the people of God. He's just promised them that he's going to work and they'd be ready to depart at the time of his calling to consider.

[5 : 51] Behold my servant. You have in these verses, verses 13 to 15, we're told to see my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted, just as there were many who were appalled at him.

His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, his form marred beyond human likeness, so will he sprinkle many nations. And kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told they will see and what they have not heard they will understand. Now I said earlier, sometimes I like rousing music. Sometimes, believe it or not, it may even be classical music.

Sometimes it may be musical music. At the beginning of every great opera or oratorio or any great musical theatre show or musical film, you have the overture.

A piece of music which introduces the whole work and in this piece of music, you get little snatches of how this work is going to develop.

[6 : 58] Little snippets, little pieces of major works that are later to come. So you have a flavour. What's this opera going to be like? Am I going to enjoy it? Well, if you don't, you know by the overture. If you don't like the overture, you're probably not going to enjoy the opera, as it were.

What we have in these verses we read is the overture to chapter 53. We're called to consider the servant and his work and his person and we're given a summary, first of all, of all that's going to be unpacked in chapter 3.

So we're called to be whole, not just to glance at, not to look at, but to consider this figure. Why should we consider it? Well, him, well, look at his person. This is the Lord speaking.

This isn't Isaiah saying, oh, look at my servant cleaning the dishes or brushing the floor. This is God saying to the people of God, consider my servant.

This is my servant, of my choosing. And it's the progress, the climax of a progressive relationship, a progressive revelation of this servant figure that has been carried on throughout these songs.

[8 : 07] The one upon whom the spirit of the Lord will come. The one who will be given as a light to the Gentiles, as a covenant for the peoples. This is my servant.

Now we know in our Lord Jesus Christ, the servant is fulfilled. So God's calling us to consider the person of his son, Jesus Christ here, sent by the Father into the world to save his people.

He's identified by God. Remember, in the life of Jesus, on two or three occasions, at his baptism, as Jesus comes out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and a voice comes from heaven and says, this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

You see, he comes as a servant to do what the servant of God never did do. The children of Israel were called to be the servant of God, to serve the Lord in faithfulness, but they didn't do it.

The son comes as the servant of the Lord to perfectly fulfill that. And so this is why God says, this is my son in whom I am well pleased. He's calling attention to him.

[9 : 24] On the Mount of Transfiguration, as Peter sees this glorious vision of Jesus being transformed, the word there metamorphosis, the glory doesn't come down upon him, it comes from within him.

It's as if the veil is lifted and the inherent glory of Christ, the Son of God, shines forth and Moses and Elijah appears with him to talk about his exodus, the means by which this prophecy in Isaiah is going to be fulfilled.

Again, the cloud comes down and a voice comes, this is my son, hear him. The day of the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, after Jesus entered the city, the Greek worshippers come looking for Jesus, the Gentiles come looking for the servant, the disciples bring them to him and Jesus says, now, now is the time for the Son of Man to be glorified.

And it sounded like thunder and a voice came from heaven saying again, this is my son. This morning, we're called by God to consider his servant.

We're called by God to consider the one of his choosing, the one whom he has sent, the one who will accomplish his purposes. This Easter time, as we approach Easter, forget your bunnies and forget your chocolate, forget your bonnets.

[10 : 55] Focus upon the Son. What's it about this Easter? Well, we're told about this, what we're told about this servant is that he will be successful.

We're told that he will act wisely or prudently. He will prosper. He will prosper. The work that he has given to do, he will do it effectively.

He will do it successfully. Behold my servant. He will bring to pass all that I have purposed. He will bring to completion all that I have given him.

Nothing will fail. And again, what does Jesus say in that high priestly prayer? I have finished the work you gave me to do. I have kept those whom you have given me except for the one who is doomed to perdition.

And the cross, as Jesus hung there after the hours of darkness, he raised his strength one last time to cry one last word, tetelestai in Greek, which means it is finished.

[11 : 56] It is completed. This servant, we're to consider this servant for when he comes, he will do all that God has given him to do.

He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. He'll be raised and lifted up. Remember when Jesus was talking to Nicodemus and he says, you remember, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that all men will believe in him.

This phrase, raised and lifted up, it involves what will happen both at the cross and at his ascension because the cross leads to glory.

There's no ascension. There's no success. There's no entrance into his Father's presence in great glory apart from his being lifted up on the cross.

So this servant, and already we're getting the note, even now the mood music is beginning to change. Yes, he's going to be successful. Yes, he's going to be highly exalted.

[13 : 04] And as Paul writes to the Philippians, he has been given a name which is above every name. God highly exalted him. But, before that happens, there is this note of suffering.

And that comes out in that hymn in Philippians 2, doesn't it? Though he was equal with God, he didn't consider equality with God a matter of taking to himself, of grasping, but he emptied himself.

He took, in the form of a servant, and found an appearance as a man, humbled himself, and became obedient to death, even the death on the cross. Therefore, God highly exalted him.

So, although we're told that the servant is going to be successful, and he's going to accomplish what he's given, it's with a note of suffering. And this mood changes even more, because there are many who are pulled at him.

His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of a man, any man, his form marred beyond any human likeness. It isn't just what he's going to do is going to be tough.

[14 : 12] It's going to bring him to the most intense suffering ever suffered in the world. There's this immediate contrast between his exaltation and his suffering.

It's a strong word. Many will be appalled at him. You know, sometimes on a Friday night, I'm into medical things, and so I like watching sometimes embarrassing bodies, anything medical.

And there was, but sometimes you think, oh, oh, oh. But there was one and the other week, this fellow had these ulcers on his legs that no one had been able to, and it was so appalling, what his leg, I physically turned away.

Now, it takes something for me to do that. But that's the reaction here. As God is calling us to consider his son, his servant, what we see is so shocking, so appalling, we want to turn away.

We're revolted by the sight of him in his suffering. His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man. Already, in the previous song of the servant, the servant says he is willing to do the father's will.

[15 : 26] He has not turned his back, he's happy to turn his back, sorry, to endure the scourging. He's happy to give his beard to it being plucked out. He's happy to give himself to being spat upon.

And of course, when Jesus is falsely arrested and falsely trialled and handed over, we cannot begin to imagine the things he endured. And although, you know, rightly, whatever we say about Mel Gibson's from the Passion, I think it would be good sometimes to watch bits of it, to do away with this sanitised view of the cross.

Because as Jesus was put to death, he looked anything but human. His physical sufferings were so... But his physical sufferings are not the main part of his sufferings on the cross.

It says, the wrath of God against sin is pushed upon him. We see this later on tonight. As the people looked at his broken body, they thought, ah, God is punishing him. Ah, but Isaiah says, he was pierced for our transgressions.

He's suffering what we rightly should suffer. So we see his person, his success, his suffering, he's disfigured and he's marred.

[16 : 44] But it is in this way, verse 15, so he will sprinkle. In this way he will sprinkle many nations. Well, what's that talking about? The phrase sprinkle has Levitical connotations.

When the high priest took the blood of the offering of atonement, once a year into the holiest of holies, he sprinkled it on the mercy seat.

The blood was applied. Why did Jesus come into the world Christmas time? What do we say? Joseph's there is baffled as to why his girlfriend's pregnant. An angel appears in a dream and says, don't be worried Joseph.

She's done to have a son by God and you are to give him the name Jesus. Why? He will save his people from their sins. He was to be given as an offering and it is through his suffering on the cross that the means of cleansing from sin for all the nations is provided.

It is as he suffers that the sprinkling of many nations will take place. It is on the cross as Jesus suffered that our sins are dealt with.

[18 : 00] On the cross on the cross where the prince of glory died here is grace here is love flowing from his wounded side.

In this way so will he sprinkle many nations and kings will shut their mouths because of him. Not literally kings with crowns but authorities.

All those who sit in authority who discount God's way of doing things. They will shut their mouths. They will be amazed. They have written him off.

They have rejected him. He is despised and rejected. But he is the one of God's choosing who is bringing to pass God's work and through him he brings God's deliverance and those who sit in judgment just shut their mouths in awe and in wonder at how God brings about his purposes.

And of course this is the thing that perplexed the disciples and all the Jews of the first century when the Messiah came they believed he would be an all conquering king. They believed he would turn around and kick the Romans out and establish David's throne in Jerusalem and it would be a great kingdom upon earth.

[19 : 18] Lord are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel at this time? Even after he was resurrected they thought that. No says Jesus. God works in a way that is contrary to our expectation.

God's way of victory is through suffering. God's way of dealing with our sins is not to get us to try and be good so that our good outweighs any bad we've done but God's way is to send his own son the king of glory to the cross to suffer and to die to pay the price of sin.

We are amazed as we see and understand and this is the phrase that the apostle Paul picks up in Romans 15 to speak about the ongoing work of the gospel.

As the Gentiles are being saved they now see and understand things that they never heard of. And if you're here this morning and you never seen or understood this that Jesus loved you and died for you it's an amazing thing.

It changes everything if you believe that. You cannot continue to live in the same way. So here we're introduced to this servant who will act wisely be successful he'll be exalted and he'll be lifted up and he will accomplish all that the father sent him to do and he'll provide cleansing for the nations and everyone's going to be amazed at this.

[20 : 56] Then you come into the first three verses of chapter 53 and the note again changes. Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

He grew up before him like a tender shoot like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not. You might think being introduced to such a glorious person, such a glorious work and such a glorious consequence there would be crowds rushing to him. Oh let me at him. Let me see this. Let me consider this Jesus. The reality is who has believed our report? Who has heard what we have said?

[21 : 58] Who has taken on board? Who understands what God has done? And the answer by implication is not many. Not many. Hardly anyone in fact.

most people today do not believe in Jesus Christ. Most people today in Whitby as in Beverly in and of themselves don't want anything to do with Jesus Christ.

Oh they might want him as a little talisman. They might want him as a life guy, guru. They may want him as an example of doing good. But as one who dies for their sins, no they're not interested in that.

And it's always been so. In the days of Jesus himself when he was on the earth performing his miracles and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Very few people followed him.

He had the crowd of 5,000 men plus 3 or 4,000 women and a couple of thousand children who he fed with 5 loaves and 3 fish. And they followed him for a day until his teaching got too hard for them.

[23 : 10] And at the end of John 6 they all turned and left him. So that he turns to his own disciples of 12 and say, are you two going to go? Very few people followed Jesus.

Although he was the one who was to come, although he was the one who fulfilled all the promises, John tells us in chapter 1, he came to his own and his own received him not.

Who has believed our report? the answer is not many. And it tells us, church history tells us the same thing.

And it tells us this idea that the world is out there waiting to hear the gospel and churches are going to be filled, that is the norm for Christian churches, it is not.

It is not. And we'll save ourselves an awful lot of anxiety and heart ache by accepting that. It doesn't mean to say we're not concerned, of course we're concerned, of course we pray and of course we witness.

[24 : 15] But the work of the kingdom is small and slow and consistent. Narrow is the way and few there is that find it. Unbelief is a fact.

Perhaps there are even some here who haven't believed the message. Perhaps you've been coming for many, many years. Perhaps your husband or your wife is a believer and you come. Perhaps your mothers and fathers and you come. But you've heard the message time and time again. Have you believed it? Why haven't you believed it? What is it about this message?

What's the rationale for unbelief? We're told here, we're told exactly why people don't believe the message. he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.

Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. The rationale is that there's nothing attractive, humanly speaking, in a saviour who goes to the cross.

[25 : 18] we're told that he grew up before him like a tender shoot, like a root out of a dry ground. And what's given there is a picture of unspectacular growth as it were.

There's nothing magnificent about this. The NIV is poor here because there's a little word in Hebrew missing, beginning of chapter 2, the little word for.

Who has believed, message to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed for he grew up. This is the rationale for why people haven't believed. There's nothing attractive, nothing, he doesn't look the part, this Jesus of Nazareth.

You know, the only reports that we have in the British Museum about a description of Jesus says there was nothing special about him. it's important to Pilate back to Caesar.

The only thing he says he looked older than his years. That's the only clue we have as to the physical appearance of Jesus. He looked older than a man of 33.

[26 : 32] There's nothing attractive. People today go, has he got chiseled looks? Has he got a good jawline? Has he got flowing hair? Perfect teeth? Does he look the part?

Do you remember how Samuel was sent to Jesse's house to anoint a king? And the seven sons are there and the big strapping lads and Samuel says oh he's got to be the king look at the size of him.

And he learns the lesson going through all the sons that God doesn't look as a man looks. A man looks on the outward appearance God looks at the heart. Well there was nothing outwardly attractive about Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet we're told he's described as a tender shoot. He's tender, he's precious to God. It speaks of God's intimate care of him before him. He grew up before him.

He grew up in the sight of his father. Like a root out of dry ground. Insignificant in the eyes of many. I'm not a gardener and the last thing my wife ever wants to ask me to do is to do a bit of weeding.

[27 : 37] Because I destroy flower. I can't tell the difference. And they're all on the wheelbarrow and she says, what have you done with their flowers? Didn't make much to me.

And that's the image there. Jesus is considered as something that's useless to be cut off and cast away. And you think of his life.

What do you think of the things we remember at Christmas? The Son of God coming into the world, not born in a palace, not to a royal family, to a poor carpenter and his betrothed wife in an animal stall, wrapped and laid in a manger, goes to the back of beyond to Nazareth to grow up so that even Nathaniel says, what good can come out of Nazareth?

who would expect someone important to come from that backwater town? Jesus to today's world is not a very impressive figure.

There's nothing to attract or desire. He did not and does not fit our image of what we need or how more importantly we can be made right with God if there is such a person.

[29 : 03] Because we like to think all religion, human religion comes down to this, what we can or cannot do. Whether it is the five pillars of Islam, whether it is the reincarnations of various Asian religions etc.

It's all about living a good enough life that we get on, we progress. Jesus comes and says, no you can't do that. You can't do that. I have come to do it for you.

If you could do that there was no need for me to come. If you by your own efforts could get to heaven there's no need for me to have died upon the cross. But he died because we cannot.

There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only unlocked the door of heaven to let us in. But then only do you see the reality of unbelief in these verses.

Lastly you see, or second last you see the sinfulness of this unbelief. The sinfulness of this unbelief. He was despised and rejected by men.

[30 : 13] A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.

One of the things we have to grasp is this, unbelief is not morally neutral. We live in a post-modern world, we live in a world, an existential world, where everything is up for grabs.

What's true for you, it's true for you. I might believe diametrically opposite view and that is still true for me. And yet you think, hang on, but that's what people believe.

And it's just a matter of belief. And there's nothing wrong. You believe that, fine, if I choose not to, there's nothing wrong with that. I'm sorry, the Bible doesn't hold that view. The Bible doesn't hold that view at all.

John said in chapter three, this is the judgment, light has come into the world, but the world, men love darkness rather than light. If you believe in the Son of God, you have eternal life, but those who do not believe in the Son of God, the wrath of God abides on them.

[31 : 22] Why? Because they had not believed in the only Son of God. unbelief is not morally neutral. Notice the phrases that Isaiah uses. Jesus is not just looked at and thought, okay, yeah, not for me.

He's despised and he's rejected. And the word despised there carries the connotations of being held in contempt, to having scorned for him, to be considered to be considered as worthless.

Not that he's not what you want, but he's worthless. So there as Jesus is portrayed, as we're called to look upon him, suffering for us, we're not only just saying, no thank you, that's not for me, but we despise him.

There's a tinge to it, isn't there, there's an element, and we reject him, we cast him off. See that he's a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, and that indicates that Jesus' suffering for sin did not begin on the cross.

Jesus' suffering for sin culminated on the cross. But the moment he drew breath and was laid in a manger, in one sense he began the work of carrying our sins, so that when he comes out the

desert, 30 years later, John the Baptist points to him and says, behold, the Lamb of God bearing away the sin of the world.

[32 : 54] At that point he was carrying our sins. As he's restricted, as he's limited, as the Son of God contracted to a span, that is inherent in his bearing away our sin.

He was familiar with sufferings, man of sorrows. Jesus knew sorrow and suffering, suffering, he knew the sorrow and suffering of loneliness, he knew the unbelief, he knew the frustrations, he knew what it is to be hungry and thirsty, etc.

And people looked at him and esteemed him not. Notice Isaiah here. He didn't say they esteemed him not.

He says we esteemed him not. Isaiah is placing himself amongst people because it's intensely personal.

Do we esteem him not? Have we considered Jesus Christ and his claims to be the Son of God and his claims to have died for sinners on the cross and have we despised him?

[34 : 05] Have we said with the clouds of Jerusalem away with this man we will not have him to be king over us? I don't mind going to church, I don't mind supporting my wife or my husband or it's good for my kids to go to Sunday school but I'm not going to live my life by this Jesus Christ.

Have we despised him? Have we esteemed him not? Have we weighed him up and thought he's not worth anything to me? I'm casting him aside. So there's a fact of unbelief.

In the light of this glorious introduction there's a reality of unbelief, there's a nature of it and there's a sinfulness of it but there's also the answer to unbelief in this passage. And at first it's shocking but it's a wonderful answer.

Who has believed our message and here's the clue to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

We have to face the fact that there's nothing as Christians, as churches we can do to make Christ attractive to people. We can't paint him up.

[35 : 16] We can't put together a slick presentation of if you have Jesus then this is what you can get because that's not what it's about. But there is something we can do.

We can pray to the Lord. The key here is to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? The arm of the Lord in the book of Isaiah is God acting in a saving way.

It's God acting to change the situation. The point here is this. Unless God acts Jesus will never be more than someone who's despised and esteemed not in the eyes of unbelievers.

Isaiah is bringing before us a truth which is unpacked in the New Testament that unless God opens our eyes we cannot see, we cannot understand.

Paul writes to the Corinthians the things of God are foolishness to the natural man. Why? Because they are spiritually discerned. What's wrong with the natural man?

[36 : 31] He's spiritually dead. But you who are dead in your trespasses and sins he says in Ephesians 2, God has made alive. God has made alive.

We are saved by grace through faith and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God. Whilst we recognise the fact of unbelief and whilst we shake our heads at the sinfulness of unbelief the reality of unbelief is such that it should drive us as Christians to our knees to pray for unbelievers.

Oh Lord reveal your arm to them. Oh Lord open the eyes of the blind. That's what Jesus came to do wasn't it? The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach the good news to open the eyes of the blind.

Lord you said that's what you're going to do. Do it because unless God opens their eyes all the preaching all the witnessing all the tracts all the books will not make the slightest bit of difference.

How is it that two people can hear the same message one be reduced to tears of joy and thankfulness and the other sit there hard hearted and say I don't know what you're on about.

[37 : 44] To one the arm of the Lord has been revealed to the other it hasn't. Grace we need to acknowledge our need we need to ask God to be at work and when he has done that when his arm is revealed Jesus is no longer despised he's loved he's no longer esteemed lightly but he's held in the highest honour so this morning as we approach Easter as we begin to think of the Easter events have we considered God's call to behold what he has done through his son behold my servant yes he's marred beyond human likeness yes he's disfigured beyond that of a man upon that but it is in this way that your sins are being dealt with it is in this way that all the issues are being completely covered it is in this way that God is saving us have we been amazed at that have we known that cleansing from sin do we know we're forgiven this morning or are we still in our unbelief do we still

count it a thing that has no value no intrinsic worth to us or are we lost in wonder love and praise there's a love of God towards us in his son this

Easter behold my servant let's pray together now heavenly father we thank you for calling our attention to your son and we pray that you would help us today and in the coming days to consider him to trace the events that we remember Easter and see there the demonstration of your own love for us because you tell us in your word God demonstrates his own love for us in this whilst we were sinners Christ died we thank your Lord that by grace some of us perhaps most of us this morning can say he died for me perhaps there are some who can't say that yet Lord reveal your arm to them open their eyes behold what you have done for them in your dear son and to see that there is life for a look as it were help us we pray to be all drawn to Calvary that we may consider and respond to your servant and know the joy of his salvation we ask it then for Jesus' sake Amen