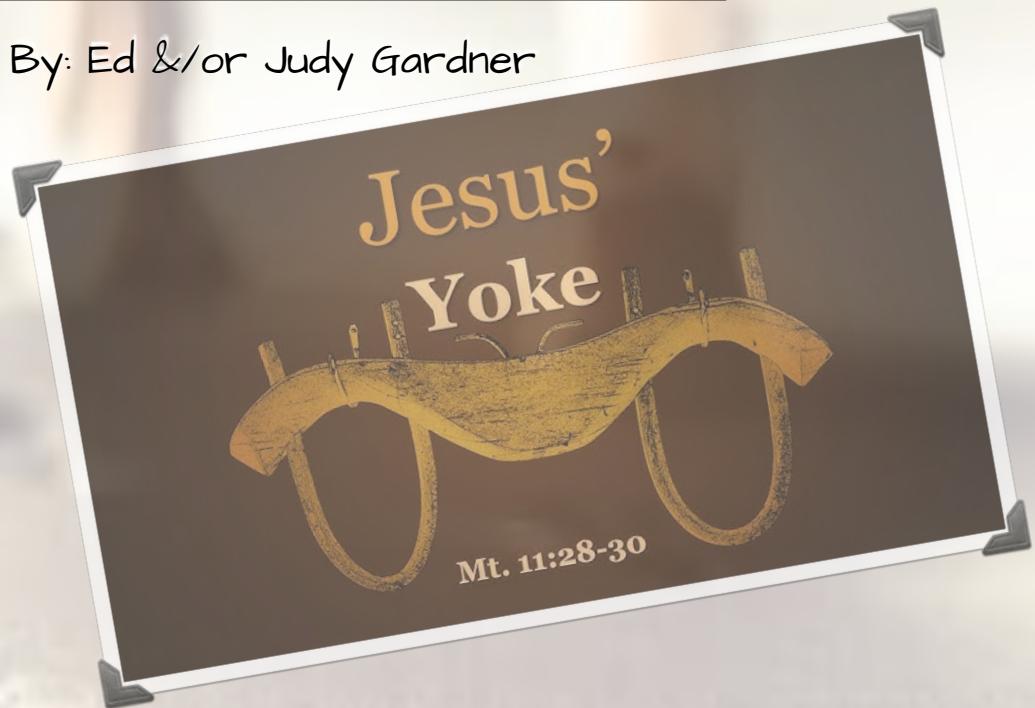


February 3-7, 2025 Edition

Following  
The Year<sup>(s)</sup> Of ^ Jesus Part 161

How Does God Give Us "Rest"

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner



February 1/2, 2025

When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

\*\*\* These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

\*\*\*\* Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside](http://www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside)). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

**Monday Reflection:** Today we continue looking at Jesus' concept of rest and just exactly how the yoke is somehow wrapped up with all of this:

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Matthew 11:28-30 (NLT)

So Jesus' offer of rest is so compelling. We'd like to think we'd do anything to get ahold of the contentment, peace and rest that Jesus is offering. But then we hear Him mention taking His yoke upon us. What's the deal with that? That doesn't sound like rest. That sounds like more work. That's what I always thought of the yoke but it turns out my concept was flawed. The yoke isn't a harness with which Jesus hitches you up and then cracks the whip and yells, "work harder! Work faster! Work smarter!" That would be exhausting. But a yoke was actually a device by which two (or more) stubborn animals that had no intention of ever working together are bound in unity and the pull together. And what's fascinating is, once the two oxen are working in tandem they can pull significantly more together than simply twice as much as one working alone. Somehow the unity of the yoke defies the laws of physics (ok science people- I know you're probably up in arms about that last comment because the laws of physics would indeed explain it but let's not talk about how accurate that statement is scientifically but rather focus on the meaning behind it).

Does the yoke still sound like the opposite of rest? I know. How can pulling a load be anything but work- even if I can get more than twice as much done? Well, because it's not just any yoke. This is Jesus' yoke. It's His. So what? Well what that means is that when you hook yourself to Jesus' yoke it's not just some other schlub (like me for instance ;o) on the other side- it's Jesus hooked up to that other side of the yoke. Now are you starting to see why His yoke can give us rest? I don't know who could do the math on this but I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that with Jesus in the other side we can get SIGNIFICANTLY more done than we ever could hope to do by ourselves. And this isn't just about physical exhaustion. Jesus doesn't say, "you will find rest for your body" but "you will find rest for your soul".

Soul rest. That's what most of us really need. Yes we can and do get physically worn out. But it's nothing compared to the exhaustion that comes over our souls due to our greed, insatiability and idolatry (if that doesn't make any sense to you read last week's reflection on idolatry from Wednesday). Jesus is able to bring us the shalom (peace) and contentment (and if you don't know what I mean by that read last week's Tuesday reflection) that He alone provides. And it is that search for shalom that is at the core of every addiction and at the core of every one of our idols. As we search for soul rest (or shalom- the sense that everything is right between you and ever relationship you have: peace between you and heaven, peace between you and others, peace between you and yourself and even peace between you and the creation all around you) we will try anything that seems to promise it.

Hey kid, want some soul rest? Come dedicate your life to money. If you get enough you'll finally be able to relax and stop the endless self criticism and guilt. Or come dedicate your life to pleasure. It will make you forget all the dark things going on in your life right now

and you'll find rest for your soul. Or come dedicate your life to power and success. When you climb high enough on the corporate ladder you'll feel the deep satisfaction that only I can give you. That lie is at the heart of every addiction and idol in our lives. But yoking ourselves to Jesus is the only way to truly find rest for our souls. Again, those other things are not bad in and of themselves. But they do make for a shaky foundation for your life. So how do I avoid those things so I can find this rest that only Jesus can provide? You have to take His yoke upon you. And when you do He guides your life. He will set the pace of your life (you won't be able to fall behind or run ahead of Him if you're yoked together with Him because I guarantee you won't be able to pull Jesus off course. In fact the only way to get off course is to get out of the yoke).

*Our lives get in step with God by letting Him set the pace. Romans 3:28 (MES)*

If you feel miserable and exhausted in your soul and if you feel like you back is breaking under the weight that you are carrying it might be that you've gotten out from under His yoke and are trying to do it on your own again. Which means you're probably going the wrong direction at the wrong pace. If that's the case it's no wonder you're exhausted- your shoulders weren't designed to carry that kind of weight. But Jesus' shoulders carry the weight of the entire world. He can handle it- you can't. Not for long anyways. And that brings us to one of my life verses:

*Since the Lord is directing our steps, why try to understand everything that happens along the way? Proverbs 20:24 (TLB)*

There's an episode of Seinfeld where George decides to always do the opposite of what comes naturally to him. At first it's a silly game but after things go so much better for him than they ever had he says at one point, "Jerry, this is my new religion." For me, Proverbs 20:24 is like that. Trusting that God's "got this" has gotten me so many dark times when I was in danger of having my soul absolutely exhausted. In the old days I tried to control and manipulate events in my life to go the way that seemed best to me. But nothing ever worked out for me doing that. In fact things generally tended to blow up when I did that. Then one day I read that verse from Proverbs 20 and it occurred to me- why not just look for the next step that God is putting in front of me and then take that step instead of trying to come up with a detailed 10 step plan? And everything started clicking for me. I know some of you are great at planning and I'm not trying to say God doesn't use planning to lead us into the lives He has in store for us but if you get too hung up on your own ability to plan or to attached to your plan what could be around the corner is soul exhaustion. So if you're a great planner (and even if you aren't) go ahead and make plans but make them in pencil and tell God that you think this is what He wants for you to be doing but if you're heading in the wrong direction to use that yoke of His to guide me into what I really should be pursuing at the pace I should be pursuing it.

That's a powerful prayer no matter how good (or bad) you are at planning.

**Tuesday Reflection:** Ok so let's say we've reflected all week about rest and the yoke of Jesus and we're ready to give it a go. How do we "take" Jesus' yoke "upon us"? Well Jesus talks about it a lot. In fact He mentions it right before the passage we've been reflecting on all week. At the end of His discussion with the 72 returning disciples but just

before He turned to the crowd and invited them to take His yoke upon them He prayed this prayer:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." Matthew 11:25 (NIV)

You don't take the yoke of Jesus by being smart and figuring everything out. You enter the yoke of Jesus by becoming like a little child. And while the things of God may be "hidden" from the wise and learned it doesn't mean they can't find their way to them. It's just that the wise and learned must be willing to take on the nature of a little child if they're ever going to find Jesus and His yoke. But what does that look like? I mean Jesus talks about how the kingdom of Heaven is made up of ones "like" little children. He also says at one point that unless we change and become like little children we will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Not because He will block you from entering but because it's only those who become like little children who would even consider entering Jesus' kingdom and yoking themselves to Him. And He's not saying we're supposed to be child-ish. There's a difference between child-like and child-ish. So what aspects of childlikeness do we need to embrace if we're going to enter into the kingdom and yoke ourselves to Him?

Well first of all, little children understand that they are powerless and need their parents (and before you start thinking of every example where that isn't true the term Jesus uses for little children is talking about toddlers who even if they sometimes- or even often- want to exert their will over their parents eventually they all come back and raise their arms and say, "up!" Carry me! I want ice cream! Help me tie my shoes. One way a disciple is like a little child is that we understand our complete dependence on God and our complete spiritual helplessness. Once while talking to His apostles Jesus highlighted this spiritual helplessness with an interesting metaphor:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5 (NLT)

I know we hate to think about the fact that we are spiritually helpless but there it is. I don't think you could hear it any plainer than that. Without Jesus we can do what? Oh yeah, nothing. I once heard someone say that Jesus was just a crutch that weak people use because they're weak. But they were dead wrong about that. Jesus is NOT a crutch. Jesus is really more of a stretcher or a wheelchair because you're not even going to limp into the kingdom of Heaven without Jesus' support. Whenever I forget that I remember John 15:5 and remind myself of everything I am able to accomplish without Him. Zip.

And trying to accomplish things without Him leads to a soul exhaustion beyond anything we could imagine. There's only one remedy to soul exhaustion and that's the rest that can only come from yoking ourselves to Jesus. I can't do it on my own and neither can you. Why not? Because even if our intentions are good we still fail over and over again. In Romans chapter 7 Paul talks about this paradox when it comes to sin. At the end of that back and forth explanation of what's going on inside of his own soul Paul sums it all up like this:

I have discovered this principle of life- that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 7:21-25 (NLT)

Ever felt that way? I know I have. And I've also felt deeply Paul's cry of despair, "what a miserable person I am! Who will save me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?" and if that was the end of Romans chapter 7 it would be the most depressing chapter in the entire Bible (even more so than every chapter in Ecclesiastes which until you get to the end is the most depressing Book in the entire Bible so that's saying something). But that's not where Paul finishes up. What does He say to himself (and to us) at the end of that cry of despair? He says, "Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord!" and suddenly Romans chapter 7 becomes a treatise on why taking on the yoke of Jesus is so important. Does anything cause our souls more exhaustion and trouble than seeing the depths of our own human frailty and weakness? And just in case you didn't already know, Paul knew a thing or two about not putting on the yoke of Jesus. We'll talk more about that tomorrow but for today maybe you and I could spend some time reflecting on what it means that God has revealed His message not to the wise and learned but to little children.

**Wednesday Reflection:** When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus (Paul was headed to Damascus to arrest and imprison Christians) it turns out that Jesus had already been trying to get his attention in more subtle ways than blinding him. It turns out Paul had been feeling that prodding for a while because when he describes his encounter with Jesus to King Agrippa (the last Jewish king of Judea) he tells us a detail that we didn't get in the first two tellings of this event. We already knew he was blinded (temporarily) and that Jesus spoke to him on that road but there was one important detail we only learn in the third telling of Paul's conversion:

On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' Acts 26:12-14 (NIV)

What in the world does that mean? Hard to kick against the goads? I never had the faintest clue about what Jesus was referring to until I started studying the yoke of Jesus and first century practices when it came to "motivating" a stubborn ox that wouldn't budge. And that brings us to goads. What is a goad? It was something farmers and shepherds used on their animals. In the case of sheep a shepherd would use a goad (which was a long stick with sharp spikes on the end of it) to correct and direct the sheep. If the sheep was walking down a the wrong path the shepherd would use the goad to correct

the sheep and put it back on the right one (ever wondered what the 23rd Psalm is talking about when it says, "he leads me on the right paths...")

With an ox the farmer would use a goad to get the animal moving when it wouldn't budge. You've heard the phrase, "stubborn as an ox" haven't you? An ox is covered with muscle and fat and if it decides it doesn't want to move anymore you can beat it bloody and give it motivational speeches for days and it won't move. But there's one place on an ox's body that is vulnerable- its ankle. There is no fat and little muscle there so if the farmer taps the ox gently in the ankle with a goad then the ox would suddenly have a change of heart and start moving. So the goad was to get an animal moving or to direct it back on the right path if it started going down the wrong one.

So why does Jesus tell Saul that it's hard to kick against the goads? Because Jesus had been goading Saul. From everything I know about Saul I'd say that God had been prodding him to move forward and accept Jesus' new way. I imagine Saul had his share of run ins with Jesus during His ministry on this earth. I would bet good money that Saul was part of the scheme to convict Jesus of heresy and arrange His death. And we know for a fact that Saul was not just present at the murder of Stephen but that he was one of the ring leaders who set the whole thing up. I imagine that all along the way Saul had this nagging feeling at the back of his consciousness that maybe he was on the wrong side of this whole thing. And I'm pretty sure that the sermon Stephen preaches just before his death in the Sanhedrin assembly (a group made up of powerful pharisees and priests) burned into Saul's heart.

How do I know? Well, I can't be absolutely sure but consider this- Stephen's sermon recorded in Acts chapter 7 is the longest sermon that we have handed down to us in the book of Acts. Luke wrote the book of Acts after having researched and talked to eye witnesses about everything that happened. So who did Luke talk to who heard Stephen's sermon? Stephen preached it in the halls of the Sanhedrin- a place none of the followers of Jesus would have been welcome. And yet that sermon is recorded with such detail and intensity it's like Luke was there himself and took down every word as Stephen spoke. But we know Luke wasn't there. So who was?

Saul. Saul was there. Saul who after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus would become the apostle Paul. He was there. And I imagine that every word Stephen spoke was like an arrow piercing Saul's heart (or maybe like a goad smacking Saul's ankle and making him miserable). So why did Saul follow through with killing Stephen and continuing to persecute the church? Because he couldn't admit he was wrong. He had planted his flag on a hill that said Jesus was wrong and that His movement needed to be stamped out. And so he followed through. He arranged the stoning of Stephen. And as Stephen dies Luke gives us one last insight into how he died:

All the people in the meeting were watching Stephen closely and saw that his face looked like the face of an angel. Acts 6:15 (NLT)

All of this was goading Saul. Making him miserable but he refused to listen. He would not consider that maybe he was wrong. Even though according to Saul himself (at that point going by Paul) in Romans 7 we find out that even before this Saul had been starting to

feel like the Law wasn't enough to justify a person. And then Stephen in his sermon makes exactly the same statement. The Law can't justify you- but Jesus can. And those words were like a goad to Saul's heart.

So what does that mean for me and you? Well, for me it means we need to be paying close attention to the guidance and direction of God. I have had seasons in my life with Jesus where looking back I can see I was headed in the wrong direction. I had gotten myself on the wrong path. I can look back and see how Jesus was goading me to move back over to the right path and I can also see that I often had put so much energy and effort and time into the wrong path that I was hesitant to leave it and admit I was going the wrong way.

Maybe you've had similar experiences. Maybe you're feeling miserable right now. Does that mean that you are definitely going down the wrong path? Nope. Not necessarily. But you might be (how's that for clearing things up?). But it's a good place to start. Ask Jesus if that's the problem. Ask Him if He needs you to change directions or slow down or stop or start moving or speed up and turn around or...

Get the picture? Life with Jesus is anything but simple. And it's often not terribly clear. But Paul wants you to know something if you're worried that you're not where God wants you to be but you want to be where God wants you to be (what's in your heart is SO important):

And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. Philippians 1:6 (NLT)

What? He won't be done with me until the day Jesus RETURNS?!?!?! I don't know about you but that's equal parts frustrating and comforting to me. Frustrating because I'm in a big hurry and God doesn't seem to be. And comforting because I know I'm nowheres NEAR where I want to be and think I need to be. But one thing I am absolutely sure of- Jesus will never stop working on me and pointing me towards the right path- even if I stop working on me and looking for the right path. I'll leave you with these words of Paul that give me great hope:

I don't mean to say I am perfect. I haven't learned all I should even yet, but I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ saved me for and wants me to be. No... I am still not all I should be, but I am bringing all my energies to bear on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead... to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God is calling us. Philippians 3:13-15 (NLT)

## **Thursday Reflection:**

So I told them, "Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off! When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire—and out came this calf!" Exodus 32:24 (NLT)

(They) have set up idols in their hearts. They have embraced things that will make them fall into sin. Ezekiel 14:3 (NLT)

**Reflection:** Today we're going to spend some more time thinking about idols in our lives. You remember don't you? Last week that's mainly what we focused on. But idols, pastor Ed? Really? We're talking about idolatry? But we don't have a problem with idolatry, do we?

When we think about idolatry those of us who grew up in church think of naked savages dancing around carved statues with huge bonfires in the background. Surely we are too sophisticated to ever be lured into worshipping an idol... aren't we?

Idolatry is defined as "extreme admiration, love, or reverence for something or someone." The most influential tv show of the past 15 years has a very interesting name, American Idol. Now I'm not saying that watching American Idol means you have an idolatry problem (maybe other problems but that's a lesson for another day ;o), but the concept is quite interesting and it goes beyond simply admiring or revering something or someone. At its core idolatry is an attempt to manipulate spiritual forces in order to get something I want. And that manipulation of spiritual forces hasn't gone away just because the carved statues and naked savages and bon fires have gone away. The gods haven't gone away... they've just gotten sneaky and now they get us to sacrifice the best of our time, energy, resources, relationship and even our health to them without us even recognizing it.

How many modern idols can you think of? Money is an easy one. How many people do you know who have sacrificed everything to make just a little bit more? Popular culture even recognizes this idol and movies are made about it, Hallmark cards are written and even songs are sung (ever listen to The Cats In The Cradle?). Work & success can be another one. We are all tempted to sacrifice in order to climb that ladder and move up. Intelligence can even be an idol. Have you ever known someone who HAD to be right? Attractiveness is another. I'm guessing that within 15 minutes of you right now there are temples that have floor to ceiling mirrors and the priests and priestesses wear spandex and leotards and people sacrifice at that temple (more in January than July but still...) every day to look better. We can even make our relationships an idol. When our relationships turn toxic and clingy we speak in terms of codependence but the Bible calls it idolatry... it is an attempt to manipulate the spiritual force of love for my own benefit. Even church can become an idol if I'm not careful. If I'm not mistaken that's exactly what happened to the Pharisees. And I'm guessing when it comes to pleasure... to the abuse of alcohol or drugs we don't need to get too specific about how that can be an idol. Nowadays we use the word, addiction, but addiction is nothing more than a fancy way of talking about idolatry.

Let's take an IQ test (idolatry quotient). Take a look at these modern American idols and then ask yourself the following questions:

**American Idols:**

Money;  Work;  Success;  Intelligence;  Attractiveness;  Relationship;

Pleasure;  Church;  Being Right;  \_\_\_\_\_;

1. Which do I spend most time thinking about?
2. Which do I most fear losing?
3. Which most gives me a sense of identity?
4. Which do I look to in order to feel secure?
5. Which do I want most to be known for?
6. Which causes my emotions to go up and down the most?
7. Which would others who know me say is my idol?
8. Which do my efforts most revolve around?

Over the next few days we are going to look in detail at what modern day idolatry can do to our lives... how it can choke out the faith that we claim is so important to us. Then over the next several weeks we are going to look in detail at how to free ourselves from the idols of money, love, success & power. There is nothing wrong with any of these things in and of themselves... they just make a lousy foundation for your life. So how about you? What is the foundation your life is built upon? What do you sacrifice the best of your time, energy, resources and health for? Are engaging in American idolatry?

**Prayer:** Father, I want to live the life You designed me to live. But it's hard. There are so many competing forces trying to get my attention. Forgive me for the times I've engaged in American idolatry and give me the grace and power I'll need to leave those things in my past. In Jesus' Name, amen.

## **Friday Reflection:**

You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind... You must not bow down to them or worship them. Exodus 20:3-5 (NLT)

The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)

**Reflection:** In the ancient world the gods had no agenda for human beings other than getting whatever they could out of the humans. The gods demanded to be served and if they were served then really they could care less how the humans treated one another.

Into this setting comes the God of Israel. He brings the nation of Israel out of Egypt and gives them the 10 commandments. Two of those commandments revolve around man's relationship to God. No other God than Me... and don't make idols. At first blush it seems like the God of Israel is no different than the other gods. He wants them only to worship Him and it might seem like He's a petulant, pouting little kid who stomps his feet when he doesn't get his way. It might seem like that until you start to dig into what it is that God wants from His people.

What God wants it turned out is what we now refer to as "ethical monotheism". It was unheard of in the ancient world. It turned out this God cared about how the people treated one another. It turned out that this God had created the people to live in community with Him and with each other and only in that climate would the people discover what their purpose on earth was.

When we sacrifice the best that we have of our time, energy, resources, relationship, etc. to any kind of modern, American idol (money, work/success, power, pleasure, toxic relationships, etc.) we become blinded to the real reason we were put on this earth. We keep thinking that surely we'll find that purpose and feel that meaning and satisfaction that we all crave (have you ever wondered why you crave that stuff?) if I just work a little harder or spend a little more on (fill in the blank... what's your American idol?).

But time after time people climb to the top of whatever mountain they believe will bring them the satisfaction they crave only to find that the idol that was so alluring is empty. And the things that matter the most (connection with God and each other) have been neglected to the point that we can't resuscitate them. An idol will cause you to miss out on what life is really all about... because I was made to worship love and follow in the ways of this God, and idolatry will cause me, will cause you, to miss out on the purpose for which you were created. You will live your whole life and never discover what it means to be who you were created to be. That's part of why the Bible makes such a big deal about the tragic results of idolatry.

Don't be fooled. Ask God to open your eyes now instead of later when it might be too late. Don't miss what you were created for.

**Prayer:** Father, I know You care about how I treat other people. Give me whatever I'm going to need to do what is right, love mercy and walk humbly with You. In Jesus' Name, amen.