The History of a Stiff-Necked People

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[0:00] Let's go.

You know, in expository preaching, and I know this isn't really preaching as much as that's more of a Bible study, but you know, you compare it to like a journey. Sometimes you're driving in the car and you see everything up close.
Sometimes you get out and you look around, kind of like we did when we got to Philippians chapter 2 on Sunday morning. We took a long time for those first 11 verses. And sometimes you're up in the plane and you're flying over and you can kind of see the big picture.
So today we're going to be in the plane, I hope, seeing the big picture because there's, like I said, there's a lot to cover here. And so let's go ahead and get started.
But first, before we start reading in chapter 7, let's be reminded of where we've been. So if you remember from last week, Stephen has been introduced to us and he's described as a man who is full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.
[1:25] And then in chapter 6, verse 8, it says that he was full of grace and power. In chapter 6, verse 10, it says that his opponents could not resist his wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke.

And then in verse 12, it says that his opponents were stirring up the people and the elders and the scribes and they came and they seized him and they brought him before the council.
And once there, they brought charges against him in verses 13 through 14. They said, this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place, referring to the temple and the law.
For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs and Moses delivered to us. So now Stephen is on, he's on trial for opposing Moses, for opposing his customs and God and his temple.
Those are the charges that they bring against him. And then in Acts chapter 7, verse 1, the high priest gives Stephen a chance to defend himself. And Stephen does something strange here in his defense.
[2:33] He responds by giving a very condensed version of Israel's history, beginning with God's calling of Abraham and then moving on to Joseph and Israel's history in Egypt.

Then he spends a long time talking about Moses before closing his brief reference to their history with Joshua, David and Solomon. And then finally, he brings Israel's history up to date with their recent rejection of their Messiah, who obviously is Jesus Christ.
In verses 51 through 53, he summarizes unbelieving Israel as a nation of a stiff, necked people uncircumcised in heart and ears, saying that they always resist the Holy Spirit as their fathers did. So do you, Stephen says. And he continues by saying, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who were announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered and who you received the law as delivered by angels, but you did not keep it.
So now that we know all this stuff, let's begin in chapter seven, verse one. And we'll again, we got a lot of ground to cover. So we'll read through verse 53.
[3:50] And the high priest said, are these things so? And Stephen said, brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran and said to him, go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.

Then he went out from the land of the of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which we are now living. Yet he gave him no entire inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession into his offspring after him, though he had no children.

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And God spoke to this effect that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others who would enslave them and afflict them 400 years. But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God, and after they shall come after they shall come out and worship me in this place.
And he gave them the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. And Isaac became the father of Jacob and Jacob of the 12 patriarchs and the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt.
But God was with him and rescued him out of all his affliction and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.
[5:14] Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.

And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob, his father, and all his kindred, 75 persons in all.
And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor and Shechem.
But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until there arose over Egypt another king who did not have not know Joseph.
He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so that they would not be kept alive. At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house.
[6:15] And when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

When he was 40 years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wrong, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian.
He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?
Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. Now, when 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai in a flame of fire in a bush.
When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. And as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord. I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and of Jacob.
[7:24] And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them.

Now come, I will send you to Egypt. This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, Who made you ruler and a judge? This man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.
This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and the wilderness for 40 years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.
This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside.
And in their hearts, they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.
[8:35] And they made a calf in those days, and they offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets.

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Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the 40 years in the wilderness of house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god, Rephin, the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.
Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness just as he spoke to Moses, directed him to make it according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers, in turn, brought it with Joshua when they disposed the nations, and God drove out before our fathers.
So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says.
Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?
[9:47] You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?

And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. You who received the law as delivered by angels, and did not keep it.
Okay, so what is Stephen's defense here? Basically what he's doing is he's saying, I'm vindicated by history.
And he's saying, in fact, it's you, the people of Israel, that are stiff-necked and have been that way against God, and you are the ones who have resisted His Holy Spirit.
If you remember, he had accused them of killing God's prophets, which was true. They had killed God's Son also. And now they were willing to kill a man who the Bible described as being full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.
[10:49] And so what Stephen does is he flips the scripts on them, and he puts them on trial instead of himself. And he shows them that, in fact, it was they, not him, who must give an account to God for their rejection of Jesus Christ.

And so I'm going to give us the application first, and then we're going to go through these 53 verses, okay? But we'll take a little bit of time going through the application. Number one, this message reminds Christians that they must be defenders of the faith.
So how does all of this apply to us? Well, first of all, we see that as Christians, like Stephen, we must be defenders of the faith. Charles Spurgeon said, We must defend the faith for what would become of us if our fathers had not maintained it.
If confessors, reformers, martyrs, and covenanters had been indifferent to the name and the faith of Jesus, where would have been the churches of today? Must we not play the man as they?
Sometime later, some men came to Spurgeon, or he found out they were talking about his preaching and that they wanted him to be more positive with his messages.
[12:03] Don't talk so much about sin, you know, be more positive. And so Spurgeon's response to them was that thieves hate watchdogs and love darkness.

And that's the truth. I'm not a thief, but I could imagine that they would hate watchdogs, right? God commands us through his word to defend the faith.
1 Peter 3.15 You've heard it before, I'm sure. But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.
So we are commanded as followers of Christ to be ready to give an account to defend the faith, but to do so with gentleness and reverence for what we are talking about.
And so defense there, in the Greek, if you were here on Sunday, you heard Dan talk about this, it's apologia. And that's speech in defense of something. That's what that word means.
[13:08] So apologetics is the study or practice of defending the faith. We're not apologizing for what we believe. We are defending, right, and presenting the faith that we believe in.

In Philippians, we weren't there all that long ago. If you remember, Paul wrote, I am appointed for the defense, the apologia of the gospel. And then in chapter 1, verse 7, he speaks of this hope of the Philippians that they will join him in his defense and confirmation of the gospel.
So this shows us that there are two sides to apologetics. The first is this. Apologetics includes defending the faith against attack.
So when our faith is under attack, we defend it. We don't excuse what we believe, right? We don't sugarcoat it. We defend it when it's under attack.

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Secondly, apologetics includes presenting truth claims of Christianity to unbelievers. So not only are we defending it against attack, but we are also presenting it as the truth of God.
[14:25] That's exactly what Stephen is doing here. Paul obviously was a great apologist, probably none better of the Christian faith, but before him was Stephen. And as we talked about before, very likely Paul was, well, we know he was there while Stephen is preaching all this, but he might have even been there before that when Stephen was arguing, defending, presenting the faith before those Jews from Gentile lands in chapter 6.

So these two men were great defenders of the faith, and they knew how to counter culture by presenting them with the truth, by confronting their culture with the truth.
And so, again, we see that we are commanded to do this, so how can we be better apologists?
Well, the first answer to that is really very simple and basic.
It's read your Bible. The better you read your Bible, the better you understand your Bible, the better you are going to be to not only defend the Christian faith, but to present the Christian faith, to counter culture, right?
Where we see that people now, especially in our days, they're calling right wrong, left is right. And so it's our job as Christians to confront those false beliefs with the truth.
[15:46] And the better you know the Bible, the better you will be at that. Another way that you can be a better apologist is ask questions. That's one thing I encourage of people in the church, especially when I was spending a lot of time as a, well, when I was working as a youth pastor, as I told my teens, ask questions.

And man, they had really good questions. But we can't afraid to come into the church and not ask our questions. You have men and women in the church who are mature in their faith, and I certainly know what I would love to have you ask your questions of me.
Or if somebody presents you with a question that stumps you, then bring it to your Sunday school teacher, or again, to one of the pastors, or somebody, and they will help you.
Another way is read books written by great apologists. One of my favorites, he's a pastor, is Timothy Keller in New York.
And when he preaches, he brings a lot of apologetics in it. But he's written a couple books. One that's really good, that I, it's one of my books that I try to read every year, is Reason for God.
[16:57] That's a great book. He's one to read, and another one is very well-known, Ravi Zacharias. If you have the internet, go on YouTube and listen to Ravi Zacharias answer people's questions in the way that he does.

I know we talked about this last week, I believe. And there are other great apologists, so learn from them. Secondly, how does this message apply to us?
Well, it reminds Christians that God is patient with rebellious people. God is patient with rebellious people. Oftentimes we forget that as Christians.
Sometimes we're so bloodthirsty and eager to see God's wrath executed on the pagans around us that we forget that God is patient with rebellious people.
Exodus 34, 6-7, if you remember, when God hides Moses in the rock and passes by him, and he declares of himself, he says, So how does this apply?
[18:09] Well, we see again that God is patient. He is not eager to punish, but eager to forgive those who repent of their sins. Third way that this message applies to us today is that this message reminds Christians that God's patience will come to an end.

Yes, he's patient. Yes, he is long-suffering, but there will be an end to that. If we continue in Exodus 34 where God is declaring who he is to Moses, he continues by saying, But who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting iniquity of the fathers, of the children, and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.
So we should be encouraged by God's patience patience, but we're also warned that there is a limit to God's patience. In Romans 1, we see that a person can resist him for so long, they can want other things so much more than him, that he will finally give them over to what they want.
They stop experiencing the common grace of God, which pertains to the sovereign grace that God bestows upon all mankind regardless of their election, as they are given entirely over to pursue their unabated sinful desires.
We must be bold in defending and presenting the Christian faith to the unbelieving world while there is still time for us to do so. We won't need evangelists or apologists in heaven, but we need them

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right now.
[19:46] And so we must be willing to give warning to unbelievers that God is patient, that God is loving, but that that patience will come to an end.

Stephen begins his defense with God's choosing of Abraham. So now let's get into digging through more of Stephen's message here. We'll go through the outline of his message.
And so he begins his defense, his message, his speech by showing or going back to God's choosing of Abraham. In verse 2, there he says again, the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Horan and said to him, go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.
According to verse 4, Abraham makes it halfway to that promised land before he settles in Haran. And then God again shows his mercy and gives Abraham another push forward after his father dies so that he winds up in the promised land which Stephen declares to the Jews is the land that they are now living in.
God's mercy is seen through his choosing of Abraham. What did Abraham have to offer God that God couldn't get in somebody else?
[21:15] Nothing. Right? What was special about Abraham? Nothing. And we see that even after God chose Abraham, we see that Abraham, you know, he was a liar.

There were times where he, you know, he was willing to give his wife away to save his own life. So this was not some kind of great, honorable man. God chose in his sovereignty Abraham.
God's mercy and patience is seen by his giving Abraham, again, that extra push to get him on his way to the promised land. And Stephen then continues his defense by recounting God's patience and mercy with the patriarchs when they resisted his will.
Joseph, one of Abraham's great-grandsons, comes to Egypt from the promised land. In verse 9, there it says, and the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt.
Jacob's sons were jealous of Joseph, their brother. Do you remember why? Yeah, he had that fancy coat that he liked to run around and kind of show, look at me and my pretty little coat, right?
[22:23] But they were jealous of him, if you remember, because God was speaking to them through Joseph. And Joseph was telling them about the dreams that they would one day bow to him.

And then in verses 9 and 10, it says that God was with him, Joseph, and God rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt in all his household.
So we see God's sovereignty again at work here. God was patient. He was merciful. And despite the patriarchs' resistance and jealousy, God was working for their deliverance.
Do we see that? That even though they were jealous of Joseph, God's messenger, God's man here, that God was still working for their deliverance, though they did not realize it at the time.
When they ran out of food, they came to Egypt. They begged their once hated brother for mercy, and he showed them mercy. Stephen then moves on to God's raising up Moses to deliver his people from slavery.
[23:38] When Moses makes his first appearance to the people, there we saw, they resist him, just as their fathers resisted and rejected Joseph.

In verse 26, Stephen retells Moses' attempt to break up a fight between two Israelites. There it says, men, Moses speaking, you are brothers, why do you wrong each other?
But in verse 27, it says, but the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, who made you a ruler or a judge over us?
So again, they rejected their deliverer as they did with Joseph and as they would later do ultimately with Jesus Christ. And so Moses runs away, if you remember.
He leaves that place. He goes to Midian where he lives in exile. Then again, we see God's patience and mercy as he sends Moses back to the people who rejected him.
[24:40] In verse 34, it says, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning. And I have come down to deliver them and now come, I will send you to Egypt.

And then in verse 36, we see Moses, God's deliverer, whom Israel rejected, saving his people. There it says, this man led them out performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years.

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So you'd think, hey, maybe they'd learn their lesson, right? Let's stop rejecting the messengers, the men that God gives to us. But we see that in spite of God's patience and mercy, once again, in verses 39 through 41, it says, Stephen says, our fathers refused to obey him.
And in their hearts, they turned to Egypt saying to Aaron, make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we don't know what became of him.
And so they made a calf in those days and they offered a sacrifice to the idol and they were rejoicing in the work of their hands. That's important to remember. They were rejoicing in the work that their own hands had created.
[26:00] At this point, though, God's patience came to an end for some of those Israelites. In verse 42, it says, but God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven.

In other words, since they rejected the true worship of God and they wanted an idol instead, God gave them up to the reality that is behind idols, which is that idol worship is really demonic worship. In verse 43, it says, you took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your God, Rephan, the images that you made to worship. But yet still, after all of this, God did not cease to show mercy to Israel. In verse 45, it says that the Israelites dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So despite all of this, even after all of Israel's rejection of God, He still, get this, He still fought for them and gave them the land that He had promised.
Finally, Stephen gets to the point of the temple. Stephen reveals that Israel's sin is rooted in pride. Their sin is rooted in pride.
[27:17] In verse 47, he points out that Solomon built a house for God, which was the temple that they prized so dearly and that made them so angry when Jesus said that He would destroy and rebuild the temple in three days.

They were irate when He said that. In verse 48, He points out that the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands. And there He quotes from Isaiah 66, verses 1-2.
So what is Stephen's point here? What is he getting at? He's arrived here at the end of his speech and what is he trying to get across to the people who are listening to him?
I think that it's this. When it comes down to it, Israel liked to rejoice over the things that their hands had made.
They liked to rejoice most over the things that their hands had made. They liked to gloat and brag about their own achievements.
[28:31] The temple had become a symbol of what they were capable of achieving. It was the works of their hands. And so their worship there and all the man-made laws that they developed, that they added on top of the commands that God had given them became a kind of self-worship of themselves.

It was all about their zeal. It was all about their righteousness. And ultimately, they were building a salvation that was based upon their own works and not God's grace.
They were boasting and proud and worshipped the works of their hands. They got joy from what they could and had achieved apart from God.
When Jesus said that he would destroy the temple and build it in three days, not made with hands, he meant that he was going to destroy, I think, in part, this kind of self-exalting man-made worship. And so, it's no wonder that when Jesus was going through his earthly ministry, that his major adversaries were the men, were the teachers, were the leaders who prided themselves on the work of their own hands, on their own religious system.
[30:06] And they couldn't stand what Jesus was saying and doing. again, Stephen was described as a man full of grace because he understood that salvation wasn't achieved by the works of his own hands.

He understood that he was saved not because of who he was, not because God could look into the future and see that Stephen was going to be some great guy that he needed on his team, right? Not because Stephen was well-versed in the scriptures or that he was keeping all of those man-made laws and all that type of stuff.
No, he knew and he understood that his salvation was an act purely of God's grace and of God's doing. So in this climatic part of the message, Stephen tells his audience that they are the lawbreakers and that they are the ones who have rejected the righteous law fulfiller.
So you can imagine, right, the tension here as Stephen is the one who's on trial and he gives his defense and as we've seen, he's gone through the history of the nation of Israel and he's proven

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that in fact, it's you.
[31:26] It's you guys who are on trial. It's you guys who are going to face the righteous judgment of God, not me. You are the ones who are the law breakers.

You are the ones who crucified the one who fulfilled all the law. They are no different from their fathers is what Stephen is saying.
They've rejected God's gracious appeals. Jesus is the fulfillment and culmination of both the law and the temple, but he says you guys have failed to see that.
Someone here is guilty, but it's not me. It's what Stephen is saying in effect. It's not me. It's you guys. So, let's be defenders of the faith.
When we go out on the 31st and on other days, wherever we are, in our houses, most certainly, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, let's be defenders of the faith.
[32:35] And let's do so in a way that is, again, gracious and reverent. Not, you know, not when we're down at the soccer fields and we're cooking hot dogs, not, you know, holding somebody's face up to the grill, believe it, believe it, right?

You must believe it or else it doesn't work that way. I don't think I have the strength to do that to anybody anyways. But you know what I'm saying, we're not getting, we're not getting, we're not repaying evil for evil with our presentation of the gospel.
But we are not letting our Lord's name get trampled on. We are willing and able, the Bible says we should be, to make a defense for our faith.
So let's do that. Also, let's be encouraged by God's patience towards unbelievers. And I know that I've heard some testimonies, and I know I shared one with you soon, where there are people in your lives that you have persistently and consistently shared the gospel with time and time again.
You've had conversations, you've prayed for them, and it took a while, but eventually they came to saving faith in Jesus Christ. So, let's be thankful for God's patience towards unbelievers.
[33:55] But, thirdly, let's not neglect our duty to warn people that God's patience will come to an end. And I know that right now, especially in the church, it's becoming less popular to talk about sin, and it's becoming a whole lot less popular to talk about hell.

Man, and I mean, at least I can understand that one, because I don't like to think about hell. Who does? It's scary to think about what awaits a soul who will spend its eternity in hell.
But, just because we don't like it, just because we feel uncomfortable thinking about, you know, we will know people who will spend their eternity there, it doesn't take away the fact that it is a real place, that that is a place where people will go, and they will spend their eternity there.
They're not going to just cease to exist, they will be there forever. And so we must warn people of that, and in fact, it's like going to the doctor.
You know, if you go to the doctor, and the doctor finds out that you have a terminal illness, or some kind of a very serious illness, you would want that doctor to tell you the truth, right?
[35:19] It wouldn't be fun for you to hear it, right? You're not going to be, oh, great, I'm so glad that I have six months to live, or something like that. You know what I'm saying? But your expectation is that doctor who knows would tell you what's going on, and if there is a cure, to tell you how you can be cured.

And so we know what's happening. We have God's word. We see that there's only one Savior, that there is only one way, to heaven, and that's through Jesus Christ.
And so we must declare that, and we must also say that those who are not saved by Christ will spend their eternity in hell. And we tell people that because it's the truth, because we are called by God's word to warn them, and that is our duty.
And again, there's a way to do it the right way. We're not going to stand up on a soapbox. Again, I'll use the soccer field with a bullhorn and say, all of you are going to hell. We're not going to do that, but we are going to present the gospel, and we are going to let people know the truth.
At least I'm not planning to do that, okay? let's close in prayer. I do know where we can find a bullhorn though. Let's pray.
[36:38] Lord, we thank you for your word and the opportunity that we've had tonight to learn from it. Help us now to apply these truths to our lives, we pray, that we would be defenders of the faith, as your word says, that we would be ready and able when the time comes to give an account for the hope that is in us, and to do so with gentleness and reverence, with love, Lord, for our neighbors, for the unbeliever.

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May we be encouraged by your willingness to be long suffering and merciful with us, forgiving us when we come to you with repentant hearts over the sins that we've committed against you.
And we pray that we would refuse to place our faith, our trust, our hope, in the worship of the works of our hands, but that we would trust in Christ alone and what he has accomplished for us that we could never, ever accomplish for ourselves.
We love you, Lord, and we thank you. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

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