All Things to All People

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[0:00] We took a brief break from our series in the book of Acts so we can go through the book of Matthew, the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew during Advent and Christmas. So we're resuming our series in the Acts today, so please turn with me to Acts chapter 21, verses 17 to 26.

And as you're turning there, just to refresh your memory of where we left off, in the preceding section in the book of Acts, we saw Paul's missionary work in the city of Ephesus. In chapter 20, verse 16, we learned that Paul was hastening to be at Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost.
And despite the fact that some believers in Ephesus prophesied that Paul would be imprisoned in Jerusalem, and for that reason they tried to dissuade him from going there, Paul nevertheless resolved to go to Jerusalem and said in chapter 21, verse 13, I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.
And so in our passage this morning, Paul finally arrives in Jerusalem. So we're in Acts 21, verses 17 to 26. Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's word.
God, as we always find, we find that your word is true, and that it brings us comfort as well as conviction.
[1:26] We pray this morning that we'd be comforted by the gracious condescension of your son, Jesus, in coming down in human flesh to save us, dying on the cross for us.

Comfort us with that grace. We pray also that you would convict us by his example. That we might live more sacrificially and lovingly in our relations to one another.
For the sake of the gospel. For the glory of your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Acts 21, 17 to 26.
When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.
After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God.
[2:56] And they said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law. And they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses.

Telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you.
We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses. So that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you.
But that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent the letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.
Then Paul took the men. And the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple. Giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.
[4:07] This is God's holy and authoritative word. As the gospel advances and as the church grows and incorporates believers from various cultures and backgrounds, inevitably new tensions arise.

And even suspicions arise. We are a church made up of people from different races and cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds and status.
Some of us are from the west. Some of us are from the midwest. Some of us are from the south. Some of us are from the northeast. Some of us are from different countries. Some of us went to

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conservative Christian colleges.
While others of us went to liberal secular universities. And still others of us didn't go to college at all. We have people who voted for Biden.
As well as people who voted for Trump. In our church. We have people who support stricter COVID policies. As well as people who support more laissez-faire COVID approaches.
[5:17] These differences inevitably create tensions. And sometimes suspicion. And the early church was not immune to these struggles. And we see an example of one very divisive and volatile issue in the early church in our passage.

And this passage teaches us that we must preserve the unity of the church for the advance of the gospel. So we're going to first talk about the advance of the gospel in verses 17 to 20.
And about the unity of the church in verses 20 to 26. So let's look at the advance of the gospel in verses 17 to 20. After receiving a warm reception from the church in Jerusalem.
From the apostles and the elders there. Note the word of the gospel in verse 19. It says that Paul related to them one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. Note the wording of verse 19 carefully.
It says Paul related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. God was the actor.
[6:21] Paul was the instrument. Luke drives this point home. If you've been with us through the series in the book of Acts. Luke drives this point home again and again and again. And we need to hear it again and again and again.

Because self-absorbed and prideful human beings are prone to make the mistake of making ourselves the center of the story. At the end of 2021, let us remember that as a church, that all the good things that have happened.
People getting baptized, converted. Many new members joining and old members maturing. And having a wonderful church-wide retreat.
And new community groups being started and community group leaders being added. The preaching cohort we had over the summer. The appointment of deacons. Yes, we had a role in all of these things.
But only as instruments. God did all those things. Paul has accomplished much by this point of his ministry, his missionary life.
[7:28] And he may have felt the temptation to elevate himself in front of this esteemed audience. After all, this is the Jerusalem church.

The first ever local church. The very place where Jesus died and was raised from the dead. The very place where the Spirit of God first fell upon his people at Pentecost.
The place the church led by the 12 apostles themselves. In fact, earlier in Acts chapter 9 verse 26, when Paul, after his conversion, tried to join up with the brothers in the Jerusalem church, they doubted that his conversion was authentic.
And they were reluctant to meet with him. It was only when Barnabas took him and introduced him that they finally met Paul and was willing to have fellowship with him.
So this would have been totally understandable for Paul to have a bit of a chip on his shoulders. And this would have been the perfect opportunity for him to, you know, preen his feathers and congratulate himself a little bit.
[8:35] Hey, look at all that I've accomplished over these years. Aren't you glad that you received me into fellowship? I'm an apostle just as bit as much as you.

Look at all my followers. Look at all these people reading my books. Or letters, I suppose. But that's not what Paul does.
He says instead he carefully, one by one, recounts all that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. Listen up, brothers.
You won't believe all that God has done since last time I saw you guys. In Philippi, God saved a wealthy woman named Lydia.
And God's not using her home as a home base for the local church that is thriving in Philippi. Well, there was that little detour in the prison cell for a night.
[9:44] Silas and I spent the night there. But guess what? Even that, God was doing that. To save the Philippian jailer. Who would have guessed? As we were singing and praying in that prison cell, God brought a huge earthquake and shook open the prison cells.

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And loosened all of our chains. And the Philippian jailer who saw that came to faith in the Lord Jesus along with his entire household.
And then in Ephesus, because the Lord Jesus was driving out so many demons during my ministry, some Jewish exorcists thought that they would try their hand in doing the same thing.
And they tried to drive out demons, quote, by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims. Isn't that funny? But of course, their attempt to manipulate God didn't work.
And they were beaten senseless by the demon-possessed man. And all the residents of Ephesus heard about this incident. And many of them confessed their occult practices and came to faith in Jesus.
[10:45] In fact, so many of them did this that the total value of all the magical books that they burned came to about $6 million. Can you believe it? Let me tell you about all the people that God has healed.

Let me tell you about all the people that God has saved. Let me tell you about all the wonderful things that God has done. God, God, God.
Christian ministry is all about God. It's not about us. That's why in verse 20, after the elders of the Jerusalem church hear Paul's report, it says that they glorified God.
They don't praise Paul for all that he has done. No, they glorified God. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory.
God had done amazing things through Paul's ministry. The gospel of Jesus Christ was going forward in power among the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. But when the gospel crosses into new territory, the church becomes more diverse.
[12:02] And as the church becomes more diverse, new tensions and suspicions arise. And that's exactly why we see in verses 20, 26, the need for the unity of the church.

The elders of the Jerusalem church put it this way to Paul in verse 20. You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law.
So this is what they're saying to him. Brother Paul, we're delighted that so many Gentiles are coming to faith in Jesus through your ministry, and we give glory to God for it. But there are also thousands of Jews that are being saved here in Jerusalem and Judea.
And they are all zealous for the law. And here lies the problem. They continue in verse 21. They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.
It had been six years or so since Paul had last been with the Jerusalem church. And in the intervening period, Paul had ministered in primarily Gentile cities.
[13:12] And though he was opposed by the Jews in many of those places, he found the Gentiles to be quite receptive to his proclamation of the gospel. And since, according to the Jerusalem Council's decree in Acts 15, the Gentiles were not required to become Jewish in order to become Christians, but they were only required, as verse 25 says, to abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality, Paul had not been teaching the Gentile converts to get circumcised.

He hadn't been teaching them to follow Jewish customs. That's what they had agreed to do. But then rumors began to circulate among the Jewish Christians that Paul even teaches the Jewish believers who live among the Gentiles to abandon the Jewish customs, the law of Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children.
But this was a baseless rumor, and we know this because of what the apostles and the elders say in verse 24. They say this to Paul, Thus, all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.
Right? So the elders of the Jerusalem church are not correcting Paul or telling him to live differently. Rather, they think that Paul already lives in observance of the Jewish customs and the Mosaic law. They just need to figure out a way to demonstrate this to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. They believe that these are baseless rumors. There's nothing to them. So though Paul did teach clearly, in agreement with the decree of the Jerusalem Council, that circumcision is not necessary for salvation, Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 7, 19, that for neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.
[15:06] So Paul did teach this very clearly. You don't need to be circumcised. You don't need to become a Jew if you're a Gentile in order to be a Christian. However, there is no evidence in Scripture that Paul tried actively to steer Jewish Christians away from their Jewish customs.

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Paul articulates his reasons for that in 1 Corinthians 9, 19-23. I have that, I think, to project. He says, For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.
To the Jews, I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.
To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share it with them in its blessing.
When he was with Jews, Paul became as a Jew in order to win Jews. Even though he knew that he was no longer under the law of Moses, he lived as one under the law when among the Jews, in order not to raise unnecessary obstacles to their faith in Jesus.
[16:31] We saw Paul's principle in action earlier in Acts chapter 16. I don't know if you remember when Paul took Timothy to be circumcised, in order, at least in part, to appease the Jews.

Timothy had a Jewish mother. The problem, however, was that he had a Gentile father, a Greek father, which rendered his ethnic and religious status ambiguous. And so some Jews were deeply offended that Timothy, who had at least some Jewish upbringing, was not circumcised.
It's not hard to imagine why they were offended, what the controversy was. Like, Timothy was taken to the synagogues from an early age by his mother, Jewish mother Eunice. He studied the Torah like a Jew.
He lived like a Jew, dressed like a Jew. But he was not circumcised, which was anathema to Jews. And so Paul took decisive action and circumcised Timothy before taking him along with him on his missionary journey so that Timothy wouldn't cause offense every synagogue that they visit.
Paul was not conceding when he did that, that Timothy needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. But that Timothy needed to be circumcised in order to be accepted by the Jews.
[17:45] It was a cultural rationale rather than a salvation one. He became like a Jew when among the Jews, in order to win Jews to Christ.

Even though Paul consistently and vehemently objected to Gentile believers being circumcised, he never objected to Jewish people being circumcised.
But to Gentiles, Paul became as a Gentile in order to win Gentiles. So in Galatians chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, Paul recounts that when he traveled to Jerusalem with Titus, he did not circumcise Titus.
Why the different response? Because Titus was Greek. He was totally Greek. So when Judaizers took issue with this and insisted on his circumcision, saying that Titus must be circumcised in order to be saved, Paul said, we did not yield, this is his quote, we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.
Because if he conceded in that moment, it would mean that faith in Jesus Christ would not be enough. It would mean that you would also need to be circumcised to be saved because he was a Gentile.
[19:06] Titus was a Gentile. That would have undermined the gospel, and Paul resisted it for that reason. The elders of the Jerusalem church understand this, and he's actually on the same page with Paul.

So that's why they suggest the course of action to dispel these baseless rumors. They say to Paul in verses 22 to 24, what then is to be done?
They will certainly hear that you have come, so do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads.
Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. The detail about shaving their heads suggests a Nazarite vow. When Jews entered into a Nazarite vow, as stipulated in Numbers chapter 6, verses 1 to 21, they asked God to intervene in a certain matter, and in order to beseech God, they consecrated themselves to God by abstaining from alcohol and keeping a distance from things that would make them unclean, including dead bodies, and by not cutting their hair.
[20:15] Those were the stipulations of a Nazarite vow. And then at the completion of their Nazarite vow, they would shave their heads and make animal sacrifices in worship. But the usual

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length of a Nazarite vow in those days was 30 days.

Since verse 27 specifies that the process would have taken seven days, and it seems that these men needed to be purified, which a Nazarite vow did not require, the most plausible explanation is that these four men had contracted ritual uncleanness during their Nazarite vow.
According to various verses in Leviticus and Numbers, when a Jew comes into proximity of something that reeks of death, such as a corpse or blood, they were deemed unclean for seven days.
In fact, Numbers 6, 9 to 12, specifically says that a man under a Nazarite vow, if he comes into contact with the dead body, would need to purify himself for seven days and then shave his head on the seventh day and on the eighth day offer sacrifices to make atonement.
So this appears to be exactly what is going on here. These men had contracted some kind of ritual uncleanness during their Nazarite vow, so they needed to go to the purification ritual and shave their heads and bring an offering at the end of it.
[21:42] And so the Jerusalem elders want Paul to take these four men under his wings, like a teacher guiding his pupils, and purify himself along with them and pay their expenses.

That's showing and demonstrating to everybody that he is not in defiance of the Mosaic law, that he is not counseling Jews to abandon their customs.
We know that this is something that Paul would have had no qualms about doing because earlier in Acts 18, verse 18, we glossed over the detail at the time, but he said that at Centraea, Paul had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.
That's what it says in Acts 18, 18. Now, that seemingly insignificant detail appears significant here because Paul had himself taken a Nazarite vow in recent years.
He had walked through this very process himself as a Jew. So obviously, Paul does not have a problem with following these customs that every faithful Jew up to this point had been following.
[22:47] The problem, of course, is that the Jewish believers in Jerusalem are not aware of that. They have never seen Paul go through a Nazarite vow. They have formed their conclusions about Paul only based on the rumors that they had heard about him during his ministry among the Gentiles.

So in making this request of Paul, the apostles and the elders of Jerusalem, it's important to note that they're not reversing course on the decree of the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15. That's why they reiterate in verse 25 that they are not asking Gentile converts to become Jewish, but only requiring them to abstain from eating food sacrificed to idols or eating food made of blood and from animals that had been sacrificed or that had been strangled because that means blood is still in them and also from sexual immorality.
Now, these particular sins were so normal and so widespread among the Gentiles that the apostles had to single them out for new Gentile converts. These requirements for Gentiles have not changed.
That's not the issue at hand. The issue at hand is how Jews should behave with regard to their ancestral customs. And precisely because these are non-issues when it comes to salvation, there is no need for Jews to abandon the customs that they have followed for millennia up to this point.
They are not asking Gentile Christians to become Jewish Christians. The elders of the Jerusalem church are simply asking that Jewish Christians not be made Gentile Christians.
[24:21] So Paul graciously complies in verse 26. Then Paul took the men and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

Think about it in Paul's shoes for a moment. Paul could have been stubborn and insisted on his rights at this moment.
Why should I go through all this trouble to abuse these people who are believing baseless rumors and are spreading this slander about me?
Who cares what they think? I haven't done anything wrong. And so what if some of the Jewish people stopped circumcising their children? The law has been fulfilled by Christ.
Circumcision is no longer necessary to be part of the people of God anyway. If he did that, Paul would have been right, but that would not have been the way of love.
[25:28] We are no longer under the law of Moses, but we are under the law of Christ, which is the way of love. And for that reason, Paul would have been wrong.

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These Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem understood that salvation was by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, but they also believed that it was important for them to maintain their Jewish heritage and to steward the venerable traditions that had been handed down from their forefathers.
And it's important to note it was not sinful for them to do so. Paul would have never done this if it had been sinful for him to do. He will never follow.
He will never condone sin. So Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, who was not afraid to rebuke even the apostle Peter in Galatians 2, 11 to 13, when Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles out of fear of the Jews who were judging him and insisting that Gentiles need to be circumcised, Paul rebuked him.
But that great apostle Paul, that fearless apostle here, graciously complies. That's the way of Christian love.
[26:44] As the gospel of Jesus Christ crosses cultures and boundaries and as the church grows larger and more diverse, there are always new tensions and suspicions that arise. But in such situations, we must preserve the unity of the church for the advance of the gospel.

Unity is not optional for the church. It is commanded. Ephesians 4, 3 says that we should be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace. In John 17, verses 20 to 21, Jesus prays for us.
He prays for all those who will believe in him through the proclamation of the gospel by his apostles. And this is what he prays for us. He says, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.
What does that mean? The unity of the body of Christ is an important aspect of our witness to Jesus. So that means whether or not the world will believe in Jesus is to some degree, humanly speaking, contingent upon our unity as a church.
This is why Paul complies with the request of the Jerusalem elders. For the sake of the church's unity, for the advance of the gospel, it is important for Paul to regain the trust of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.
[28:20] There are, there remains, a number of differences and disagreements about secondary issues within our church. They are not issues that pertain to salvation.

And if we all find our primary identity in Jesus, then we can preserve the unity of the church for the advance of the gospel. I think there are several biblical and common sense principles that can guide us to promote that kind of unity.
First, I think if we find ourselves more animated or passionate about things of secondary importance than the gospel of Jesus Christ, then I think we need to examine our hearts to see if the affections of our hearts are misordered or disordered.
Where is our ultimate hope? Is our hope in Jesus? Or is it in politics? Or in science and education?
Secondly, we should labor to give each other the benefit of the doubt and to give each other the best possible framework and construction.
[29:33] Assume the best of one another. Listen to one another. Try truly to understand one another instead of banding talking points and slogans back and forth.

Third, I think we need to guard our speech. We should avoid extreme rhetoric. Avoid slander and name-calling of all kind. Can you imagine if the Jewish believers at this point in the book of Acts called Paul an anti-Semitic?
Similarly, people who refuse to get vaccinated are not murderers. And people who mandate vaccines for public health reasons are not fascists.
Fourth, instead of focusing on how other people can accommodate us, we should focus on how we can make sacrifices to accommodate them as Apostle Paul did. And when we start to feel entitled and disgruntled as time to time will happen to all of us, thinking, why should I have to give up my freedoms on count of them?
Think about what Jesus did, all that he gave up in his incarnation and his humiliation in his death on the cross to save us. We find a great example of this principle in Hudson Taylor.
[31:11] Hudson Taylor was a 19th century British Christian missionary to China. He's the founder of China Inland Mission, which is now called OMF International. He lived and ministered in China for 51 years.

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He was responsible for bringing over 800 missionaries and starting 125 schools in China. God used him and those 800 missionaries to save 18,000 Chinese people.
Hudson Taylor was a pioneer in many ways. Unlike his missionary peers who spent the bulk of their time with English businessmen and diplomats who needed their services as translators in major port cities, Hudson Taylor went inland where other missionaries had not gone.
And he lived among the Chinese people that he loved and served. Also, shortly after arriving in Shanghai in 1854, Hudson Taylor decided to dress in Chinese clothes and grow a queue.
The traditional Chinese pigtail with the shaved front that I don't think is in use now was back then. Other Christian missionaries around him were incredulous or critical, thinking it unnecessary and sometimes undignified that Taylor would do that.
[32:34] But Taylor's actions were based on his biblical convictions. He was following the example of Apostle Paul. He explicitly states this. He was trying like the Apostle Paul to become all things to all people that by all means he might save some.

In the book Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission, The Growth of a Work of God, it's written by Hudson Taylor's son and daughter-in-law Howard and Geraldine Taylor. There's an excerpt from a letter that Hudson Taylor wrote to William Thomas Berger who was responsible for training new missionaries back in England for China Inland Mission.
In that letter, Hudson Taylor addresses the new missionaries in training and tries to persuade them to adopt the Chinese lifestyle once they arrive there. It's a lengthy quote but it's worth quoting in full so I'm going to read it.
It's projected for you on the screen. This is what he says. I am not alone in the opinion that the foreign dress and carriage of missionaries, the foreign appearance of chapels and indeed the foreign air imparted to everything connected with their work has seriously hindered the rapid dissemination of the truth among the Chinese.
And why should such a foreign aspect be given to Christianity? The word of God does not require it nor I conceive could sound reason justify it. It is not the denationalization but the Christianization of this people that we seek.
[34:00] We wish to see Chinese Christians raised up. Men and women truly Christian but with all truly Chinese in every right sense of the word. We wish to see churches of such believers presided over by pastors and officers of their own countrymen worshiping God in the land of their fathers in their own tongue and in edifices of a thoroughly native style of architecture.

It is enough that the disciple be as his master. If we really wish to see the Chinese such as we have described let us as far as possible set before them a true example.
Let us in everything not sinful become Chinese that we may by all means save some. Let us adopt their dress acquire their language seek to conform to their habits and approximate to their diet as far as health and constitution will allow.
let us live in their houses making no unnecessary alteration in external form and only so far modifying their internal arrangements as health and efficiency for work absolutely require.
This cannot but involve of course a certain measure of inconvenience such as the sacrifice of some accustomed articles of diet etc. etc. But will anyone reflecting on what he gave up who left heaven's throne to be cradled in a manger who having failed all things and wielded omnipotence became a feeble infant wrapped in swaddling clothes who from being the loved one of the father never misjudged never unappreciated and receiving the ceaseless adoration of all the hierarchies of heaven became a despised Nazarene misunderstood by his most faithful followers neglected and rejected by men who owed him their very being and whose salvation he had come to seek and finally mocked spit upon crucified and slain with thieves and outlaws will any follower of Christ reflecting on these things hesitate to make the trifling sacrifice indicated above we just celebrated [36:20] Christmas and remembered how Jesus humbled himself and was born in the form of a servant as a baby in a manger if the God of all creation took on our lowly human garb in order to save us can we not accommodate our fellow human beings for the sake of the gospel so that's our exhortation at the end of the year I think it's fitting let us labor to preserve the unity of the church for the advance of the gospel let me pray heavenly father grant us the humility of Jesus for that is the solution for the divisions for the hostilities for the bitterness and resentment grant us the humility of Christ help us to remember that it's not about us but about you help us to love one another and bear with one another

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Lord we know that it's not a marvel to create a society where everyone agrees with enough persecution and oppression that is attainable but Lord it is a marvel when people who disagree on a whole host of issues can live in peace in unity and center themselves around something that is higher and more important and that Lord we believe can only happen in your family so we pray Lord that that would be our witness that the unity of our church not necessarily the uniformity but the unity of our church in the spirit with the bond of peace would be a witness to the watching world so that they might believe that you indeed sent Jesus to save us help us with that now in Jesus name we pray amen

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