

Camelback Bible Church



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MADE IN HIS IMAGE

The Plan: Reclaiming All Things for God's Glory (Part 1)
Genesis 1: 24-26, Colossians 2:8-10

It's Sunday, the Lord's day, always my dad's favorite day of the week. Last Sunday, the Lord called on my dad and took him into the fullness of His eternal glory. Today I want to celebrate the reality that my dad is more alive than you or I ever thought life could be. He now sees Jesus face to face. I'm so grateful that Dad is now complete, because he is filled fully with the fullness of Christ.

For five decades Dad and I have been best friends. He always gave me the impression that his greatest purpose in life was to pour himself into me. He disciplined me in Christ. Even in my fifties, he was still discipling me in Christ. He would write notes of spiritual encouragement to me every week, and pray for me at length every day. While I was growing up, he was the only dad on the block playing softball in the evenings with the all the neighborhood kids. Later, when I was in college, Dad would spend as many as fifty hours helping me on term papers. I miss him terribly. I feel his loss acutely.

Thank you for your prayers for me this week. I need them. This is the first sermon in twenty years that my dad will not hear. But it's not the first sermon he didn't pray for. In his last note to me, he wrote, "Tim, this new series on The Plan sounds like it has wonderful potential. I will be praying for you." So he prayed, at least for the first sermon in this new series, the sermon I deliver today.

[PRAYER]

Father, we bless you for giving us parents. I want to thank you that I had Dad for so long. I pray now that you would bring us into this sermon series in wonder at what you have planned for this world, causing us to rejoice at how we fit into that plan. May we never seek to fit you into our plans, but only to fit ourselves into your glorious plan. Father, thank you for my church family. Thank you that I have many fathers at Camelback, many brothers, many mothers, many sisters. Personally, it's been a hard year, losing my granddad, my mom, and now my dad. And yet, Father, the size of my loss is more than matched by the size of their gain. They have eternal life! I'm overjoyed for the three of them. Thank you, Father, that now I need to depend on you more fully, which is exactly what my parents would have wanted. Father, take us to your word now, powerfully for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

The Importance of a Plan

Stephen Hawking was born on the anniversary of Galileo's death and now holds, in the University of Cambridge, the chair originally occupied by Isaac Newton. He has for many years been widely regarded as the most brilliant theoretical physicist since Einstein. How does Professor Hawking, closely linked to three of the greatest minds of all time, spend his time these days? Simply in this way: by trying to unravel The Plan for the universe.

And here's what impels Hawking's cosmic curiosity. He believes that if he can assemble a unified theory of the existence of all things he will be able to discover the greatest mystery of all: why *we're* here, what is *our* purpose, how *we* should live. In other words, by scientific observations of the material world, Hawking believes he can discover the meaning of human life.

But there's a problem engaging in such a quest. Namely, you can't construct a unified theory of existence until you know how it all began. While we may speculate about beginnings, about black holes and big bangs, no one has been able to say definitively where such phenomena came from except to concede that the laws of nature were apparently amenable to them happening. But the question thereby follows: where did the laws of nature come from? It's a question science finds difficult to answer. As Charles Darwin put it in his autobiography in the 1880's: "the mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us." And since then, nothing in almost a century-and-a-half of computer-driven scientific research has revealed otherwise.

But Hawking, still believing in the possibility of a mathematical explanation of the origin of all things, jumps the gun in a dramatic way and postulates what he thinks the ultimate conclusion will be. As to the human race, we are "just chemical scum on a moderate sized planet."

Just chemical scum? We know intuitively that we're more than that, even though we're not half as smart as Stephen Hawking. We are more than randomly colliding molecules in a cold and indifferent universe.

That's why the vast majority of Americans, although schooled in the creed of scientific naturalism, still believe what the Bible says in its very first verse, where it answers the question of origins with a line as breathtaking as it is succinct. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (Genesis 1:1). Twenty-six verses later, the picture is filled out with another line that is absolutely spellbinding. *Let us make man in our image.*

It's precisely this last line that I want to make the focus of our thoughts over the next ten weeks because into this one scintillating line – *Let us make man in our image* – we find a summary of the entire purpose of God for this world.

In Genesis 1:26, we find The Plan.

Too seldom do Christians think about The Plan. We are masters of the little things, such as meditating on our momentary plans and fitting God into them. But we remain novices in big things such as understanding God's plan, which is the biggest thing in the world. God's plan, The Plan, ought to shape everything about us.

The Plan of God – we need to discover it, love it, and live it out as though there were nothing else in our existence even remotely as important.

So where do we begin in learning about The Plan?

Let's begin where God Himself begins, with His teaching about the divine image. Look again at Genesis 1:26: *then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."*

What is the Image of God?

Here is The Plan succinctly introduced. *Let us make man in our image.*

I don't think you could say anything more magnificent about human beings than what is said in these seven words. *Let us make man in our image.* Doesn't it make you want to stop dead in your tracks and celebrate? ***You've been made in God's image.***

But what does it mean?

Scholars and theologians have rattled off many answers – it means we share in God's creativity, His conscience, His moral scruples, His artistic tendencies, His love. And we quickly begin embellishing on all the possibilities . . . before taking a careful look at the word itself.

Catching our breath for a moment, let's think about the word 'image'. What does *it* mean?

Well . . . to be an image of someone means to reflect a very close likeness of someone, as close a likeness as possible without actually being that someone.

We see many images today, on our screens – television screens, computer screens, cinema screens. In fact what we know about people – especially world figures – comes most often from images. I have just returned from a writing leave where, just over the fence from the cabin where I was doing the writing, the children of George Bush and Ralph Lauren were married on a ranch in Colorado. They were probably only a few stone's throws away from me, and yet I never saw them. But I do have an image of their wedding: I saw pictures of it, with the clearly romantically smitten couple, on my television screen.

Think of another world figure like Muammar Gaddafi, much in the news lately. None of us have seen him in person, but we've seen him in images on screens. We've seen the tortured face. What a close facsimile those images have provided! Having seen the images, we could readily identify the real Gaddafi if we were to meet him in public. We could even describe something of his character and passions – all because we've seen images of him on screens.

We have been told in Genesis that we were created with the over-arching purpose of being images of the Almighty God. That means that what is seen in us ought to be a mirror-image of God, a perfect reflection of what God Himself is like. That is a staggering revelation!

God should be recognizable because people have seen an image of Him in you. What an exalted privilege it is to be human!

Imagine the One whose hand is bigger than the galaxies, whose righteousness is higher than the Himalayas, whose glory is brighter than the sun – and you are a reflection of Him!

This far surpasses any the other accolade you could attribute to yourself. You may have American citizenship. You may have a million dollars. You may have a cabin in the mountains. You may have a special talent. You may have a loaded resume. You may have a loving marriage. But put all these accolades together in a single bar of a bar graph and it will be an imperceptible sliver compared to the bar, shooting up to the heavens, which measures what it means to be in the image of God. It is staggering proposition to be created in His image!

I think of the arresting lyric in the musical drama *Les Miserables*. “Who am I? I’m Jean Valjean!” the lead character sings out proudly. What’s he so proud of? Simply being Jean Valjean?

After reflecting on Genesis 1:26, how would we sing this lyric? “Who am I? I’m the image of the infinite, eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, perfect, holy God!”

If you look at me, you’ll see a reflection of Him! You want to know what God is like. Look at me and you’ll see His likeness. I am the screen on which God Himself is showcased.

What, more exactly, does it mean to showcase God? The author of Genesis answers the question by revealing four ways in which the image of God works itself out in practice – in other words, four ways in which the divine image is effected in our lives.

How the Image of God Works

1) Relationally

The first thing Genesis teaches is that the image of God is effected . . . *relationally*.

Look at verse 27 – *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

Notice, grammatically, the change in number. God created man (singular) in His own image. In the image of God, He created him (singular). Male and female He created them (*plural*). Where did the plural pronoun ‘them’ come from?

The answer is pretty obvious when you look back a verse to Genesis 1:26 – *Then God said, “Let us (plural) make man (singular) in our (plural) image, after our (plural) likeness.*

It would seem that God is Himself, in some sense, a plural being. He's not more than one God, but He is one God in three persons. In other words, God is a family in relation. If we are to be His image bearers, we can only do so as a family in relation.

Hence we cannot image God alone. We can image God only if there are at least two of us.

Or put it this way. Whatever it means to be in God's image requires at least two to make it happen. God has created humans to be like Him as persons in relation.

The truth of this teaching is immediately apparent. What is our world except a collection of human relationships? As human beings, we are defined in terms of our inter-relationships – in the home, at school, in the office, among neighbors, etc.?

We can't image God alone, any more than God can be God apart from his three Persons. We image Him specifically in relation to others.

How are your relationships? Are you providing an image of God, especially in your relationships??

This is our biggest problem as human beings. Relationally, we are failures, plagued by dysfunction. How many hundreds of millions were killed in wars in the twentieth century? More than in the wars of all the centuries before it combined. What does that suggest? It suggests we don't do very well relating to each other on an international level. Nine-eleven (9-11) was a horrific illustration of international discord. Ten years later, the relational conflict continues, with the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On a macro-level, clearly, we are conflicted relationally. So too on a micro-level. The most fundamental micro-relationship is marriage. How many husbands and wives have perfected this relationship? Instead, relational discord invades every marriage, as well as every workplace and every neighborhood. Relational conflict is more typical than not.

So do the words of Genesis 1, teaching that we are images of God, suggest something negative about God? Do they indicate that, since human beings struggle so painfully in their relationships, there is something dark about the God they are imaging? The answer is a resounding "No!" The God we are meant to image exists in perfect triunity. In our messy inter-personal relations, we have dimmed, we have effaced, the image of God. But we have not dimmed or effaced God Himself. His glory is an unassailable glory.

It is important now to remember that when it comes to bearing God's image, relationships are fundamental. To God the relationships within the Godhead are essential to who he is. As beings made in his image relationships are just as essential to who we are. Are relationships important to you?

How the Image of God Works

2) Globally

The image of God is effected not just relationally, but also globally. Look at verse 28 – *And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”*

What are we to imply by the command to *be fruitful and multiply*? Clearly, it is a call to engage in procreation, to reproduce and multiply the number of human beings. Such a command would make Thomas Malthus, who in the eighteenth century railed against over-population, roll over in his grave. *Be fruitful and multiply* – we’re already at seven billion people worldwide and quickly closing in on ten billion! Do we really want to be fruitful and multiply?

But Genesis 1 is not prescribing an increase in population for its own sake. Rather, it is enjoining multiplication in order *to fill the earth*. And remember what we are filling the earth with . . . with people bearing the image of God in their relationships.

Whatever it means to bear the likeness of God (a question we still need to answer), we are called to do so to the ends of the earth, filling every nook and cranny of this terrestrial ball with an image of God in relation, so that in every corner of creation you will be able to see an image of what God is like.

Therefore, we are not meant as human beings to be insular. We are not islands as Simon and Garfunkel sang long ago. No, we are relational and always moving outward with our relationships. We are filling the whole earth with images of what God is like. How it delights God, how it glorifies God, when His image is seen everywhere on this planet! We are not confined as humans. There is something in our constitution – in our being created in God’s image – that propels us forward and outward.

But many people are not like that. Rather than move forward and outward, they remain backward and inward. They keep people out of their yard, by building a fence. They keep people out of their club, by forming exclusive entry requirements. They keep people out of their country, by stopping them at the border.

But that’s not what God is like. Look at Him. He doesn’t draw a boundary around Himself, but expresses Himself generously, sharing Himself lavishly with others. Can you imagine God building a wall and sitting behind it with a sign saying “Keep Out!” “No Trespassing”, “Violators will be Prosecuted.”

That’s not the way God is. He pushes the relational envelope outward. It’s why He created us. He loved being God so much that He wanted to share its blessings with others. So He made us in His image. He didn’t need us. But He loved the idea of others being able to know what it meant to be like Him. So He moved outward. He brought the possibility of imaging Him to earth. As His image bearers, we must do the same – bring His image to the ends of the earth. Are we?

How the Image of God Works

3) Therapeutically

The image of God comes to effect not just relationally and globally, but also therapeutically.

Look again at Genesis 1:28 – *Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and **subdue it and have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.*

Subdue and have dominion. These are pejorative sounding words to us, but not to God. Because when you subdue the earth with God's image, when you subdue it with His likeness, it is always a good thing. Like a master gardener cultivating a royal estate, you subdue the grounds by leaving the master's mark on everything.

I am reminded of a man in Cambridge named John who was the head gardener of my college, Corpus Christi College. Every college in Cambridge has gardens that are manicured magnificently, so that scholars can, inspired by their surroundings, meditate in these gardens and think great thoughts – at least that's the theory. The flower beds are perfectly groomed. The lawns are hundreds of years old and absolutely meticulous. No weeds, only perfection. John, the gardener, sees to it.

John has given his whole life to this ten acre estate, hoeing and grooming, pouring himself into the garden. You could say he's subdued the garden with his image. All ten acres have come under his dominion. And they're so beautiful – because he's left his own therapeutic imprint on them.

He's pulled everything together. He's choreographed the plants in magnificent harmony. He's worked to consummate therapeutic effect in his patch of turf.

That's the way God intends it for us. He wants us to subdue the creation therapeutically, subduing it with His good image, leaving an imprint of His likeness on everything we touch in the world. Are you having a therapeutic influence on your world?

How the Image of God Works

4) Gloriously

One of the most remarkable things about the image of God is that its content is never really explained, at least not in the immediate context of Genesis, nor even in the broader context of the Old Testament. This groundbreaking truth – that we are created in the image of God – is simply stated as a fact of creation, followed closely by the revelation of how that truth is effected in creation – it is effected relationally, globally, and therapeutically – but we are never told what exactly this image is, what the image of God consists of, what is its content.

Since the Old Testament never directly answers the question of the nature of God's image, the rabbis who lived between the testaments speculated actively about it . . . and they came up with a fourth effect of the image, namely, glory. The inter-testamental literature is filled with debates about the meaning of God's image, and the consensus was always unanimous. To image God means to radiate His most salient visible attribute – His glory. To be in God's image means to provide an image of His glory.

Now, this doesn't mean that God's glory becomes our glory. God shares His glory with no one. But it does mean that God's glory can be reflected as *His* glory in those who bear His image. At least, so the inter-testamental rabbis held. But it must be conceded that their writings weren't inspired by God . . . so the link they established between image and glory is not infallibly established.

Well, here we must take note of the fact that there was one inter-testamental rabbi who, after becoming a Christian, wrote several letters that were inspired. His name is Paul. And every time Paul uses the Greek word, *eikōn*, for image, he also uses, in the immediate context, the Greek word, *doxa*, for glory. To repeat: every time Paul uses the word 'image' he also uses the word 'glory' in the near context, confirming, this time under inspiration, that the two words, image and glory, are to be linked closely together. You see this in Romans 1 and 2 Corinthians 4, and in other places as well.

The fourth effect of bearing God's image is therefore to radiate His glory. To be created in the image of God is thus to radiate the effervescence of God's own glory. What an extraordinary thing it is to be human!

This is an entirely different message from that of philosophical naturalists. In fact, it couldn't be more different, more wonderfully different. Far from beginning our existence in an undistinguished pool of chemical scum, we were in fact made to radiate the glory of the incandescent God! Scum or glory – the two represent radically different options. It makes us sympathize with Malcolm Muggeridge when he says, "I'd rather be wrong with Augustine than right with Voltaire." But with the Bible, we don't have to fret about being wrong. Its testimony is always and perfectly true. We are right to celebrate our understanding that to be in God's image means to reflect His glory, because this is what the infallible word of God teaches.

Do you realize who you are? Do you understand what you are? You are made in the image of God, reflecting who He is relationally, globally, therapeutically, and gloriously. Has anything more magnificent ever been said about your identity as a human being? Do you appreciate who you are?

Social scientists say that the most important ingredient in forming a personal identity is the ingredient of memory. If you don't remember who you are, you lose a sense of identity. I saw it with my mom, in her bout with Alzheimer's disease, when she wouldn't remember the things essential to her identity. Her place of residence, her grooming, her family, her name. You could see her sense of identity being lost – as she lost her memory.

As Christians, we're so often guilty of collective amnesia. We forget who we are. We are no longer impressed by the words of Genesis 1. We give very little thought to the shining truth of our existence that we are created in the image of God in order to reflect the glory of God. We're not just chemical scum, with no inherent meaning to our existence, not even close to it. We are human beings made for the purpose of imaging God's glory. What a great thing it is to be human! Please *remember* this.

But we must go farther – what, more exactly, ought we to remember? We have come to know how the image of God is effected – relationally, globally, therapeutically, and gloriously – but what does the image actually look like in practice?

Once again, we acknowledge that the Old Testament does not fill out the answer for us. But we needn't despair, because, on this question, the New Testament is abundantly clear.

What the Image of God Means

When you open up the New Testament, you discover that there is one person who incomparably radiates the image of God. Unlike us, he is not created in God's image, he *is* God's image.

Who is he? What was his name?

His name is Jesus Christ.

Listen to the words of Holy Scripture –

2 Corinthians 4:4 – *Christ is the image of God.*

Hebrews 1:3 – *Christ is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of God's nature.*

Colossians 2:9 – *In Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*

Jesus is not just the screen on which the image of God can be seen. He is the image itself. If we want to discover the best image of what God, we need only look at Jesus. If we want to know what the image of God looks like in a human being, once again we need only look at Jesus.

Do you hear what the New Testament is saying? If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Similarly, if you want to know what humans ought to be like, look at Jesus. Why Jesus? Because He *is* the image of God.

And yet humans fall short of the image and the glory of God (Romans 3:23). If anyone thinks we don't, then that person has a rather pitiful view of God, a God shot through with egotism, self-grasping, and despair. And we know God isn't like that. He's the precise opposite of what we so often image – He is full of righteousness, love, and life.

So how do we recover the capacity, bestowed on us from the beginning, to image the perfect God of glory? This is the question we'll be unpacking throughout the rest of this series on The Plan. How do we reclaim our ability to image God?

Isn't the answer obvious? We got to get *into us* the one who is the perfect image of God, the one who is all the fullness of deity in bodily form!

Paul says that is precisely what happens to every true Christian. In Colossians 2:10, he writes: *For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him.*

How We Recover the Capacity to Image God

In Jesus dwells all the fullness of God and we've received in us all the fullness of Jesus. That, in short, is how we recover the blessing of being image-bearers of God. By getting into us the one who images God perfectly – namely, Jesus.

People have told me I am the spitting-image of my paternal grandfather. It's a strange thing to hear because I never met my paternal grandfather. He died a few months before I was born. I never knew him.

And yet, in another sense, I know my grandfather very well, because I'm linked to him through my dad – since my grandfather was in my dad, his son, and my dad is in me, his son. Because my grandfather is in my dad and my dad is in me, my grandfather is in me.

If we are ever going to image God it will be because His Son Jesus Christ is in us.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the absolutely indispensable ingredient for the fulfillment of The Plan of God for this world. No creed or religion that leaves out Jesus is going to fulfill God's plan for the world. The Plan to radiate God's image, to reproduce His likeness in humans relationally, globally, therapeutically, and gloriously, depends on the singular link we have to the Father God through Jesus Christ His son.

You can't radiate God's image unless Christ is in you. You can't be fully human unless Christ is in you. Is He in you? Do you belong to Him? And does He belong to you? No question you can ask yourself is more important.

And if Jesus Christ does indwell you, do you remember this most important ingredient of your identity? That because of Jesus Christ you are an image of God? There must be no Christian amnesia for you. You remember who you are.

And because Jesus is in us, because we can now image God's image, we must be making an impact on our surroundings, on the people in our lives, because the image in a person always has an effect relationally, globally, therapeutically, and gloriously. Hence an amazing effect. You ought to be making a very significant impact. Are you? – are you impacting your world? Are you influencing the workplace? Are you shaping your family? Are you molding your friends? As image-bearers of God, you ought to be a refining influence. Are you?

You might respond, "I haven't really thought about this much."

Really?!

Are you remembering who you are? You are the likeness of God Himself, and yet you do not think about making an impact? Everywhere you go, the effervescent glory of God is being showcased in you, and you don't think about making a difference!

You say, "I'm kind of shy. I struggle with sin. I'm stifled by guilt. I've squandered so much of my life in vain pursuits and wasted time."

This may all be true, but now that Christ is in you – is He in you? – God doesn't want to hear about it. The only thing He wants to hear is your voice articulate powerfully, just like Jean Valjean, who you are. "I have been created in God's image to showcase His likeness, to be so filled up by Him by being filled up by His Son – so full I just can't keep hidden who He is in me."

Why should you want to say anything less? The people around you are desperate for just such an image of God.

The Plan of God . . . is that you can provide them that image. Because of Jesus in you . . . you can.

Science can't do it. It can't change the character of its times. The starting point for science is that humans are just chemical scum. That won't get us very far. It won't provide for the recovery of God's image. Only Christ can do that.

God has a plan to reclaim all things for His glory and He wants to use you in the process. Are you throwing yourself into human relationships? Are you moving outward globally? Are you ministering to people therapeutically? Are you giving glory to God?

My Dad fell victim to a disease we still don't understand, in which his back disintegrated into a debilitating web of micro-fractures. The pain he was experiencing was off the charts. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't walk very well. He couldn't even talk without gasping in pain. Add to that, he was losing his eyesight, going blind. For these reasons, he stopped going to church for the first time since he became a Christian at Subic Bay in the Philippines as a naval midshipman during World War II. For the first time, he started missing church on Sundays and who could blame him?

But, then, listening to one of my sermons at home about the importance of exhibiting the self-giving love of Jesus to others, my dad was convicted of his withdrawal from people, and made a new resolution to start coming back to church again, no matter how throbbing his pain, no matter how humiliating not being able to recognize (because of his failing eyesight) long-time friends and having to ask their names. Some of you noticed him coming back to church: a pale, crumpled shadow of his former self.

Why did he come back to us?

Because of who he is in Christ, an image of God, who must reach out relationally, outwardly, ministering to others therapeutically, spreading the glory of God to whomever he could.

In fact, on Sundays, he started hanging around until he was often the last one to leave, at times growing faint from the agony of standing up with his decaying back, talking with people. He did it right up until last Sunday when, instead of coming to church, the angels came to Dad, laying him out on his back on his bedroom floor, a position he normally could not endure, customarily sleeping in a fetal position. He hadn't been able to lie on his back for years, but now he could because the new version of Dad had been taken to heaven, receiving from the Lord a new body with a sturdy back. But not before he heard, I think, from the Lord's lips, "Well done my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. You have radiated my image. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master."

Here's the point for us: if an old, dying man, rived through with pain, nearly blind, sleepless at night, can do it, can be an image of God relationally, moving outward, ministering to others, for God's glory. If he can speak into our lives, through word and deed, loving us, remaining at church until the last one of us leaves, making a big impact on our lives, then certainly can we do it too.

What are you living for? Is it God's plan? Or is it your plan?

Isn't it our inestimable joy to be able to say, "My plans . . . are God's plans. I'm going to subsume my plans under His. I'm going to radiate His likeness relationally, globally, therapeutically, gloriously. That's why I'm on earth. I want to see people around me changed because they're seeing God, they're seeing Christ, in me. People changed in the neighborhood. People changed at work. I'll get out of my deathbed in order live out that plan! Because there's nothing else worth living for. Living to image God's glory is truly to live, to live abundantly. Amen.

[PRAYER]

Father, thank you for your Plan. This great Plan that you're going to unveil progressively over the next weeks. Father, we can't wait. We want to be right in the middle of The Plan. And you want us right in the middle of it. Father, take us forward. Help us to put off all excuses why we're living according to our own plans, and help us to get back to yours. Bring us to that point in Jesus Christ, Father. Forgive us our sins. Put a new heart within us. I pray for any friends who do not know for sure this morning that Jesus resides within them that they would refuse to leave today without giving their hearts to Christ. Telling Christ, "I'm yours. Come indwell me." Father, you are a perfect God, a holy God, with a magnificent Plan. May we walk in it. In the name of the one who has re-fitted us for this plan, Jesus, we pray. Amen!