

LUKE 1:5-25

THE MAN WHO THOUGHT HIS PRAYER WAS NOT ANSWERED

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

“Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.’

“And Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.’ And the angel answered him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.’ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

“After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ‘Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.’”¹

“**Y**our prayer has been heard.” Whatever else may be said of the father of the Baptist, this godly priest received God’s commendation as a man of prayer. We would do well to emulate his example. Permit me to introduce you to Zechariah. Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, and Elizabeth, his wife, are **commended as “righteous before God.”** This godly couple is denoted as “walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” Zechariah and Elizabeth pleased God because they had a heart to obey God.

Another important piece of information that Doctor Luke provides readers is that **the couple was childless**; “Elizabeth was barren.” Today, we think it is odd that a couple should have a sense of emptiness without children. We consider it strange that a family (and women in particular) would consider themselves unfulfilled without children.

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Modern couples seek fulfilment through education, through social advancement or through financial security. A society that is focused on self-gratification and self-fulfilment seems incapable of understanding the grief that attended the barren womb in an earlier day. That children are recognised as a reward from the Lord and that the blessed man has his quiver full of children [cf. **PSALM 127:3-5**] continues to be cause for consternation until an individual is submitted to Christ and thus reflects the mind of God.

The final piece of information necessary for understanding the message is that Zechariah was a **descendant of Aaron**. As a descendant of Aaron, the old man was both privileged and responsible to serve in the Temple. However, because of the availability of so many priests at this late date in the history of Israel, those ministering before the Lord were chosen by lot. This one time would almost certainly be the only time Zechariah would ever minister in the Temple. It was a though the servant of God prepared for a lifetime to ensure that he was prepared to serve for the one time he was called to fulfil his responsibilities before the Lord.

Keep these points in mind: Zechariah and Elizabeth was a godly couple that pleased God because of their obedience; the couple, though apparently longing for children, are childless; and Zechariah, dedicated to service before the altar of God, will serve only one time. Within these elements are found a Christmas message. 'Twas the prayer before Christmas, and without that prayer, Christmas would never come for us.

THE PRAYER THAT CHANGED A WORLD — Some prayers make a great impact in world affairs; other prayers make scant difference in the world about us. Zechariah presented a prayer before the Lord that forever changed man's relationship to the Living God. The impact of our prayers is dependent upon the greatness of the One to whom we pray and on the magnitude of our request. Whether our prayers have an impact in the world is unrelated either to our stature or personal greatness or to our focus on fulfilling our own desires. This one truth could readily change our prayer life forever; this one truth could transform us into powerful men and women of prayer.

As he began to speak, the angel first comforted the terrified priest by informing him of the purpose of his mission—"Your prayer has been heard." Because we are disposed to reading this account as part of the Christmas message, we naturally think that the angel is referring to a prayer for a child. After all, he did continue by announcing the birth of a child. Because Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless and with the ensuing account of the birth of John the Baptist, we assume that the focus of the account is on the birth of the Baptist. What seems reasonable may not be accurate, however.

There are other possibilities to consider in interpreting the angel's message. There is an old saying within the medical profession that teaches that when you hear hoof beats you should not look for zebras. The point is, look for the obvious when presented with a dilemma. Don't invest too much time in the esoteric, or in speculative reveries. The obvious, however, may be overlooked in our haste to move to the next issue; what seems apparent may not be supported by facts. We are looking for a birth, and so we assume the focus is the birth of the Baptist.

Take careful note of the angel's words to Zechariah: "Your prayer has been heard." That word which the Angel used and which is here translated by our English word "prayer" is a fascinating word. Doctor Luke was careful to employ a powerful word that speaks of "a need" or of "an entreaty." Such a plea is addressed almost exclusively to God. One would never present a *dé̄sis* to man. The word is found much less frequently than other words that are translated "prayer." The word emphasises the distinction between formal petition and tenacity, which is tantamount to wrestling with God.

Deūs, the word used here, speaks of the “prayer of a righteous person” that James insists has “great power as it is working” [JAMES 5:16]. This word describes the prayers Anna offered as she gave herself to “fasting and prayer” [LUKE 2:37]. This prayer is akin to that offered by a widow of the church, “who is truly a widow, left all alone.” Such a woman “continues in ... prayers night and day,” because she “has set her hope on God” [1 TIMOTHY 5:5]. This type of prayer is offered by saints for fellow believers who have supplied their need [2 CORINTHIANS 9:14]. This is the prayer that is urged on the saints of God who pray in the Spirit [EPHESIANS 6:18]. Such prayer is described as “supplication” urged on all who with joy seek God’s face [PHILIPPIANS 4:6]. Thus, we would conclude that *deūs* is powerful, prevailing prayer.

Zechariah’s entreaty was powerful before God. The prayer for which God sent an answer was not mere form; rather, it represented some great burden that impelled Zechariah to plead with God. The prayer of this godly priest grew out of some deep longing of his heart. It would appear that the prayer was such that it revealed some characteristic aspect of Zechariah’s life. Something that was so elemental to his life that when his name was spoken people would think of that characteristic must have formed the core of his prayer.

Luke’s language also suggests that what he prayed was of such importance that he was not likely put off by what we are tempted to call unanswered prayer. The problem of unanswered prayer plagues the people of God and worries us. How long shall we pray? At what point do we cease seeking the face of God? The Master has taught us that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart” [LUKE 18:1-8]. Until God has clearly issued the command, “Do not speak to me anymore of this matter” [see DEUTERONOMY 3:36], I take it that we should keep on praying. Surely, Zechariah exemplifies the application of Jesus’ words. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” [MATTHEW 7:7, 8].

Faith always gives a double knock at Heaven’s door and refuses to be put off until the gracious King has received the supplicant, giving what is sought. Too often the saints at prayer resemble “Deputy Dawg,” a dopey television cartoon character from years long past who would knock at the door, all the while saying, “No one is home (I hope. I hope. I hope.)”

Another issue of significance is that the angel did not speak of Zechariah’s “prayers” (plural) but rather of his “prayer” (singular). Perhaps you are surprised that the noun is singular and not plural. I considered alternative possibilities to my more casual interpretation of the text and I began to understand that God is informing us that one great prayer flowed from the heart of this godly man. He could not pray for other needs without bringing this one great need before the throne of the Great King. He no doubt presented other needs before the Lord God, such other needs would be mandated by his role before the altar of the Lord; but this one need figured prominently in His prayers.

This leads me to ask, what characterises your prayer life? What one plea stands out when you pray? What one great request defines your prayers before the Lord? When others listen to you pray (and more importantly, when God listens to your prayer), what one thing characterises your multiplied requests of the True and Living God? May God speak to our hearts to challenge each of us to consider what it is that consumes us and what so grips our attention that we cannot help but seek the face of God until He gives the answer we seek. May God deliver us from insipid requests that change nothing and which should they be answered would be unrecognised as answered prayer in any case. May our God instruct us in the art of prayer so that with importunity we continually cry out before Him. May God give us a burden for some great cause. May God burden each of us to pray one great prayer.

This emphasises the point that it was Zechariah's prayer and not the prayer of the couple that God noted and answered. This is a vital point, for it might lead us to conclude that though the natural inclination is to think that God speaks of Zechariah's prayer for a child, it is more reasonable to see that some prayer he offered at the altar received a quick response from the heart of our gracious God. Don't overlook this point. Again, it provides vital clue to our understanding of the passage.

Whatever the truth may be concerning that for which Zechariah pleaded, the answer he received forever changed the world. Before Jesus, there was John. We don't think of John as part of the Christmas pageantry. Yet, it is certainly significant that Doctor Luke begins his account of the life and ministry of Jesus with the birth of John! Mark and John, also, emphasise the role of the Baptist as Messiah's herald, the one who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

Without John, there would be no Christmas. Isaiah foretold not only the ministry which the Messiah would present, but He also prophesied of the Baptist when he wrote:

“A voice cries:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

[ISAIAH 40:3-5]

Old Testament prophecies are specific in stating that the Messiah could not be revealed until the Forerunner had heralded His presence. A messenger announcing Messiah's advent was required.

Yet another clue to the prayer which Zechariah presented and which God answered is revealed through this knowledge. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets though we are inclined to remember him as the forerunner of Messiah. In the spirit of Elijah and in the lineage of the priests of God, John, with singular courage, faced kings to condemn their sin and he prepared a nation to receive their Anointed Prince. Though it cost him his life, he boldly promoted righteousness and opposed wickedness. Though but an imperfect man, he was nevertheless powerfully used of God within Israel as herald of God's Messiah. John the Baptist was the one appointed by God to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah. John would not have been so powerfully used of God had it not been for godly parents.

Let's see if we can at last discover the prayer that changed our world. First, the one offering the prayer was noted to have been obedient before the Lord. Zechariah was focused on serving the Lord God. When the angel appeared as Zechariah fulfilled his priestly duties, the angel pointedly spoke of a prayer; to be precise, the angel noted Zechariah's prayer. That prayer was seen as a powerful longing of the heart that could not be silenced. I iterate my belief that it was not a prayer for a child that is here in view. This couple had no doubt longed for a child to grace their home; but if the angel announced and answer to that prayer, I find it odd that there is no mention of Elizabeth's role in praying.

I believe you will agree that it is odd that the angel did not speak of “prayers” (plural) if the childless condition was in view. It is also odd, that without some divine encouragement, of which nothing is said, that a couple beyond childbearing age would have long continued to pray for that which had not been given in youth. Considering all the evidence, it is easy to conclude that Zechariah’s prayer had nothing to do with pleas for a child.

It should be equally apparent that the angel spoke to Zechariah as he burned incense on the altar of incense, part of his appointed duties as a priest of God. The angel spoke of a prayer, and the most readily apparent prayer would be one that had been offered up immediately before the angel’s appearance before the altar of incense. If we can discover the type of prayer that the priest was responsible to offer before the altar of incense, we will probably know something of the prayer that God heard and answered. If we know the general tenor of the prayers of the priests, we will likely be able to discover the specific prayer that God answered in this first chapter of Luke’s Gospel.

According to **1 CHRONICLES 6:49**, “Aaron and his sons ... made offerings on the altar of burnt offering and on the altar of incense ... to make atonement for Israel.” The author of the **HEBREWS LETTER** provides further insight into the duties of the priests and the prayers that would be presented before the altar of incense. Listen to what is written in that missive. The author says, “Even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the Ark of the Covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

“These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties” [**HEBREWS 9:1-6**].

We know that the altar of incense was placed inside the sanctuary, directly in front of the inner sanctum and flanked by two other appurtenances—the menorah and the Bread of the Presence [**EXODUS 30:1-10; 37:25-28**; cf. **1 KINGS 7:20-21, 48**]. The Altar of Incense was made of wood and, like everything in the sanctuary, was covered with gold. Twice daily, incense was burned on the golden altar. The blood of all sin offerings was smeared on the horns of the golden altar [**LEVITICUS 4:7**]. One further piece of information which aids in uncovering the prayer Zechariah offered is that the altar of incense is specifically said to be before the Lord [cf. **LEVITICUS 16:18**]. These are all-important points that add to our understanding of what Zechariah was doing and what it was for which he prayed.

The daily ritual required of the priests is described in the Pentateuch. Every morning, the ashes on the sacrificial altar were to be cleared off and the fire would need to be stoked [**LEVITICUS 6:10-13**]. After this, the daily burnt offering—a yearling male lamb, plus its accompanying cereal and drink offerings—was required to be offered on that same altar [**LEVITICUS 6:8-13; EXODUS 29:38-42; NUMBERS 28:3-8**]. The priest, dressed in priestly garments [**EXODUS 28:29, 30, 35, 38**], would enter the sanctuary to trim the oil lamps, and offer specially formulated incense on the altar of incense [**EXODUS 30:7-9, 34-36**]. Outside, again, he would offer a special cereal offering, composed of cakes of flour cooked on a griddle [**LEVITICUS 6:19-23**]. In the evening, a second lamb was to be offered as had a lamb for the morning offering, and the priest again entered the sanctuary to trim the oil lamps [**LEVITICUS 24:1-4**; cf. **1 SAMUEL 3:3**] and to burn incense. He would also offer the second half of the high-priestly cereal offering.

Our study of the altar of incense demonstrates that the priest was required to perform specific duties. Those duties especially revolve around the presentation of prayers for the people of God. Incense is closely associated throughout the Word of God with the prayers of His people. The church of the New Testament is represented as being responsible to offer praise and prayers before God. In the Apocalypse of John, we are provided a vivid description of the “twenty-four elders” before the throne of the Lamb. The “twenty-four elders” represent the raptured saints who are removed to Heaven by the Master before the Tribulation. Each elder has “a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” [REVELATION 5:8]. As the seventh seal is opened, an angel is given “incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar”—the altar of incense. Then, we are informed, “The smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints,” ascends before the Living God [REVELATION 8:3, 4]. This emphasis in the last book of the Bible is nothing less than an iteration of the words of the Psalmist:

“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!”

[PSALM 141:2]

We have established that Zechariah was obedient to God. He would have but one opportunity to fulfil the duties to which he was appointed and for which he had long prepared. Those duties included the presentation of the prayers of the people of God with incense upon the golden altar. If we are able to establish the content of the prayers of the people and the type of prayers which the priests were to offer, we can reasonably speculate upon the prayer which Zechariah offered and which God answered.

The one consuming prayer of the people at that time appears to have been for the Messiah to be revealed. Even among the Samaritans, we note a deep longing for Messiah’s appearance. You will perhaps recall a conversation that is recorded when Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman. As Jesus and the woman conversed, the discussion turned to Messiah and she blurted out, “I know that Messiah is coming... When He comes, He will tell us all things” [JOHN 4:21]. In our rush to understand Jesus’ method of evangelism, we often overlook important truths. One such truth is that this woman looked for Messiah to come, believing that at His coming He would explain everything—even to the Samaritans.

That which was longed for among the Samaritans was even more intensely yearned for among the Jewish people. They sought the Messiah, anticipating His advent through what was written in the Holy Scriptures. Jewish scholars knew where Messiah was to be born [MICAH 5:2] and even the time of His coming [DANIEL 9:25, 26]. The Magi, seeking the One who was born to be “King of the Jews,” stirred up intense interest in Jerusalem. The biblical scholars available to answer Herod’s query were not at all reticent in telling them where to look. They directed them to look “in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet” [MATTHEW 2:5]. Despite the unbelief of the scholars and the nobility, the nation awaited the revelation of God’s Messiah.

In the Temple, an old man called Simeon served. “Righteous and devout,” he was “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” This is code for the revelation of Messiah’s presence. We know this because the Word informs us that “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord’s Christ” [LUKE 2:25, 26]. Moved by the Spirit, Simeon went into the temple courts as Jesus was presented on the eighth day. Listen to his praise before God. Taking the child in his arms, he lifted his voice and said:

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

[LUKE 2:29-32]

All who frequented the temple—all Israel—knew Simeon. They knew that he had received a message from God and that he awaited Messiah’s presentation. They knew that he sought the glory of God. Worshipers would also have known Anna who “did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day” [LUKE 2:36, 37]. Simeon and Anna were simply more vocal in their longing than were most, but of this we may be assured—all the people of Israel looked for Messiah to be revealed. Moreover, it was common knowledge that the time of His revelation was near. If Messiah was not born at that time, then all prophecy was in error and there was no hope of salvation.

During the ceremony of circumcision, Zechariah and Elizabeth were to name their child. The people pressed Elizabeth to give the child a family name. She was insistent, however, that he was to be named “John.” This was what the angel had commanded, and the couple was obedient even in the smallest details. Argument with Elizabeth failed to dissuade her, so the people turned to Zechariah.

The Word includes a humorous note about John’s naming ceremony. The people “made signs” to Zechariah. How human! Zechariah was mute; he was not deaf. Doesn’t that precisely describe us? We assume that because a person can’t speak, neither can he hear. Imagine the surprise of the people, however, when upon giving Zechariah a writing tablet and pen, he wrote “His name is John” [LUKE 1:57-63]. If Zechariah’s insistence astonished them, they were flabbergasted when he suddenly began to speak. His first words after nine months of silence were a blessing of God [LUKE 1:64]. Well, if I were compelled to be silent and at last was able to speak, I would likely lift my voice to God in praise. After all, the silence of the months had given Zechariah time to think of what He would say when at last he spoke.

Notice Zechariah’s Song of praise. Surely the prayer which he had presented before the golden altar more than nine months previously, the prayer which was answered so quickly and which resulted in enforced silence for long months, would figure prominently in his first words! Carefully note LUKE 1:68-79.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,

might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The foremost thought throughout Zechariah’s paean of praise is that God has come to redeem His people! For those who imagine that Zechariah was praying for a child, and especially for a son, note that his praise centres on the advent of Messiah and not on the advent of the Forerunner. I am confident that this demonstrates that was his prayer before the Advent of the Christ was that Messiah would come, that the people of God would be saved, that the Saviour would at last present Himself. Zechariah prayed for Israel’s redemption; and God answered by sending His Son.

THE PRAYER WHICH CAN YET CHANGE A WORLD — Underscore in your minds the essential truth that **the message of Christmas is the Gospel message**. Without Christ, there is no Christmas. Clearly, God was at work fulfilling His Word when the Son of God became the Son of Man. This singular event was not without man’s participation. In grace, God invites man to share in the divine labour that His work may be accomplished. Zechariah and Elizabeth were chosen to share in that divine work. Mary and Joseph were chosen to participate. The Advent of Messiah had at last arrived. The multiplied prayers, expressing the deep longing in the hearts of God’s people, merge into one great cry: “Come, Lord Jesus.” Undoubtedly, this is the prayer that was offered before Christ’s First Advent; and this is the prayer that must still be presented before the Father—“Come, Lord Jesus.”

A pagan society has transformed the Christmas Season into a vapid celebration of strained relationships and of greed. The modern lifestyle ensures that families have grown distant—estranged and separated both by distance and by interests; so, we require a holiday to bring families together again. As society exalts *self*, we need a holiday to remember our roots. Transform the commemoration of Christ’s birth into a holiday commemorating family, however, and we leave the season as empty as when we entered. Many are more wounded by the presence of the season than if the season had never been.

Christmas has become a materialist’s dream. We are trained from childhood to gauge the depth of our love for one another by what is given and what is received in the exchange of gifts. Giving has far too often become a kind of glorified potlatch in which we jockey to receive better gifts than what we give. Because we feel ourselves constrained to shower one another with gifts, the period of mid-November to the New Year now accounts for as much as forty to fifty percent of retail sales. Increasingly, it now appears that this period will be extended into ever earlier dates; not infrequently, Christmas decorations are now seen in the stores as early as Halloween. A flat Christmas means a lean year for many merchants. When Christmas is the biggest celebration of the year even in pagan Japan and the Ginza glows brightly with Christmas decorations, the holiday has become nothing if not a ceremony of materialism.

It is bad enough that non-Christians have seized the day and that the spirit of the day reflects pagan instead of Christian attitudes; but we who are called by the Name of the Son of God stand equally guilty. We are frequently caught up in the same godless attitudes. What is worse is that we are unaware of how we have been compromised! I am not suggesting that it is wrong to exchange gifts. Neither is it a bad thing to remember family ties. However, there is an old saying in the Southern United States which states that **Good is Enemy of the Best**. Whenever we settle for what is **good** instead of what is **best**, we are always poorer because of our choice.

In Zechariah, God has given us a pattern for what is best. Review your prayers for this year past. Have you longed for Christ's coming? Have you sought His presence? Have you prayed even as He taught?

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.”

[MATTHEW 6:9, 10]

Do your prayers reflect a longing for His presence? If you haven't prayed for Him to fulfil the promise of His return, have you prayed for Him to be revealed in you? What prayer characterises your life?

Whatever else may or may not be done among us in these weeks of Advent, let us each determine that we will commit ourselves to seek Christ's presence among us. I urge that the people of God pray for His return, for He has promised to come again. I urge that as a people we so live that we need not be ashamed at His return. I urge that we “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” [HEBREWS 3:13]. I encourage each of us to “stir up one another ... and all the more as we see the Day drawing near” [see HEBREWS 10:25]. If for some reason we cannot pray that our Lord Jesus should come quickly, finding a people prepared for His Name, then let us pray that Christ the Lord may be formed in us [see GALATIANS 4:19]. Let us make this Christmas by living in anticipation of His coming. “Amen, come, Lord Jesus.”