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DATE: September 12, 2026
SERIES: The Gospel Is
MESSAGE: God's Faithful Fulfillment
PASSAGE: Romans 9:1-29
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

Every time we open our Bibles, every time we engage in reading them, what we are encountering is God's word, his very communication for us, and his word is filled with promises. Promises for us, for his people.

Romans is certainly that way. Romans, our study that we began last winter and we will resume tonight, it is full of dense theological material, there's no question. But it's also full of incredible promises.

Last May when we finished up Romans 8, we encountered some of the most beautiful promises imaginable. We were told at the end of Romans 8 that for all those who are in Christ, nothing, absolutely nothing, will be able to separate us from God's love. Nothing. It's an incredible promise. It should fill us with courage and with hope and with confidence. It should do that. Unless God is not the kind of God that keeps his promises. Unless God is not the kind of God that keeps his promises.

So here's a question for us: can we trust him to keep his promises? That's what we want to look at tonight. Open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 9, picking up our study again of Romans. This is a long chapter, a thick chapter theologically, and we are going to be covering 29 verses together, so we're going to try to move quickly.

Now, as you open to Romans 9, let me just summarize some of where we've been. I'd love to cover the entire sweep of all 8 chapters of Romans. I can't do that, so let's just be satisfied this evening with remembering the theme verses of this entire book. Our Roman numerals up there on the stage. Paul gave his thesis in Romans 1, verses 16 and 17. That's where he said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the righteous man shall live by faith."

The gospel is the proclamation of the good news that, while we were desperately stuck in sin, God intervened. God intervened by sending his son into the world for us and for our salvation—that Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and on



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the cross, he defeated sin and death. He made a way for us, rebels, enemies of God, to become friends. We were unrighteous, but because of the cross, we have been declared righteous, when we have placed our faith in Jesus. Forgiven, declared righteous, now in righteousness standing before a holy God. And not only that, we also have entered into newness of life, marked by the very empowerment of God's spirit. We can walk in newness, and nothing can separate us from God's love that he has for us in Christ.

Incredible promises. Incredibly rich. The gospel changed Paul's life. So now we get to this question. We've read these promises, but can we trust that God will follow through on them? And I know that everyone in their heart right now is saying, absolutely, absolutely. But as Paul continues, he addresses this very topic, because for Paul, there was something right there in his face, right in his circumstances that was causing that question to be asked.

See, as the gospel swept the world over, as Jesus came in and changed everything, what is so tragic, is that the people to whom he came, by and large, not completely, but by and large, they had rejected him. Paul's very brothers and sisters, Israelites, had not taken up the gospel with the same fervor that the gentile world had, and that came to a question. It raised a question. Has God not been faithful to his promises, to Israel? And that's what he takes up in this chapter.

So we begin in verse 1 of chapter 9.

1 I'm telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

These five verses set the tone for this chapter. You can tell Paul is heartbroken. He is devastated by the reality that his kinsmen, his countrymen, have not taken up the gospel. They haven't received it.

Now, Paul, we need to remember, was Jewish, so we need to say not all, some, but not all. But Paul, even as he took up the gospel, when he went out and ministered in the gentile world, Paul never lost his love for his people, and that makes perfect sense to us, doesn't it? Of course he wouldn't lose his love for his people, long for them, desired that they would turn, to Christ, turn to the Messiah.



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So not only is Paul sad, not only is he devastated, I think also in these verses, we see that he is explaining their situation is tragic because God's history with Israel was so rich. God had poured out blessing upon blessing, all these experiences of God meeting them, giving them symbols of his presence with them. And all of it culminated, climaxed, in the fact that when God chose to send his Son into the world, God became flesh. He did so among the Israelites as an Israelite. Jesus Christ was a Jewish man, living and ministering in a Jewish world.

So now this raises the question, did their rejection of Christ and all that's transpired, does that give us, as Christians, reasons to be concerned about whether or not God is able or willing to always fulfill his promises? It's kind of the question that Paul is circling around. Has God failed to deliver on his word, his promises to Israel? And Paul immediately in verse 6 answers that question. Verse six.

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

God's word has not failed. God's word refers to all that God has promised. Everything written in the Old Testament scriptures, all the things Paul just named that are true and present throughout the history of Israel, all of the wonderful promises and memories and history of God being faithful to them—God hasn't gone back on an ounce of it. Not at all. God is a promise keeper.

None of that has failed, Paul said. God's plan has not gone off course. That word fail could be used to describe a shipwreck. Is God's plan shipwrecked? Answer, not at all. God didn't have a plan B and then get frustrated and have to turn to a plan C. That's not how God works. God is moving his plan forward. And as we go, Paul is going to explain precisely how that is true. He clearly wants to confirm and wants to assure his readers, "God has not failed. His word has not failed. Here's how that can be true." So that's what he goes on to explain for the rest of the chapter. Continuing in verse 6. I'm going to read the first part again. He says:

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For [now here's the reason] they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac, your descendants will be named." 8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son."

So now as we get into all the technicalities of this, we have to keep in mind Paul's big question, has the word of God failed? Has he gone back on his promises? And his answer was emphatic—not at all. And his explanation for how that can be true in light of the fact that so many among his Jewish brothers and sisters have not



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believed comes at the end of verse 6. Paul said, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants." So the question is, what does that mean? What does that mean?

Now, what it means is that while there is a larger group of ethnic Israelites, there is, within that group, a group that is often referred to as true Israel, the remnant of God, the smaller group within that larger ethnic group of Israel that God has chosen to work with throughout the Old Testament. This is often referred to as the Remnant, and that's going to come out again in our passage in just a few minutes.

Now, we need to understand something about Romans, is that this idea is not new. Paul talked about this in Romans 3 and 4 when he was talking about the case of Abraham, and he talked about circumcision. And he said, "Now remember, circumcision in the flesh does not save. Circumcision of the Spirit is what matters. Outward signs of alignment with Israel aren't what saves anyone. It's what happens in the heart. It's faith that saves."

And so what Paul is saying here, and it can catch us off guard, what Paul is saying is that God didn't promise that every single Jewish person would be saved. That wasn't part of God's promise in the Old Testament. I think this is an illustration for us. It's important for us to consider the way we think about God's promises.

See, I think so often we hear a promise of God and we decide this is how God is going to fulfill that promise. But often God fulfills his promise in unexpected ways. He moves his plan forward in ways that catch us off guard. We can count on the fact he will move his plan forward, but it may be in unexpected ways.

In order to illustrate this, Paul turns to the case of Abraham and Isaac. That's the case that he brings up. We already read through that. But we need to understand the whole story of Abraham and Isaac. You remember the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were childless. She was barren. And what happened is they longed for a son, and God showed up on the scene, and God promised them a child. And so Abraham and Sarah then waited and they waited, but eventually they faltered in their faith and they tried to make the child of promise that God had said he would give, they tried to make that come about on their own. So Sarah said, hey, here's my handmaiden, Hagar. Why don't you be with Hagar? And so Abraham did. Abraham and Hagar had a son, had Ishmael, a descendant, certainly of Abraham. So you could just imagine Abraham in that moment saying, hey, mission accomplished. We have our descendant.

Except, that is not how God intended to move his plan forward. God had a way. God had chosen that he would move his plan forward, not through human effort, not through human, not through human ingenuity, but through the gracious



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fulfilling of the promise, by miraculously allowing Sarah to conceive, and she did just that. Sarah and Abraham gave birth to Isaac, the child of promise, the fulfillment of God's plan. It's important we acknowledge Ishmael, technically, was a descendant of Abraham. But God had not chosen to advance his mission, his plan to fulfill his promise, through Ishmael. God chose to do it through Isaac. And God's choice is what matters. Ishmael was certainly a descendant, but he wouldn't be the one through whom God would fulfill his promises.

So now as the text continues, we move to the next generation, verse 10.

10 And not only this [now, Paul's gonna make his point more emphatically, not only this], but there was Rebecca also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born and had not yet done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose, according to his choice would stand, not because of works but because of him who calls, 12 it was said to her, "the older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau, I hated."

Now, I am betting that many of you have wrestled with this part of Romans 9. I have wrestled with this part of Romans 9. Difficult, especially that part about Jacob and Esau. We're going to get to that in just a moment. But again, as we move forward, we just want to keep the big picture in mind. What is the big question that Paul is seeking to answer? Has God's word failed? Is he failing in fulfilling his promise? And his answer already was, "absolutely not."

So now he points to Isaac and his kids. Now Isaac and Rebecca, his wife, were in the same situation as Abraham and Sarah. Rebecca also was barren. And once again, God miraculously allowed Rebecca to conceive, and she conceived twins. Now, the question that arises within that is, which twin is God going to advance his plan through? Which twin, since they're both descendants of Abraham, and they're both descendants of Isaac and Rebecca, which twin is God going to advance his mission through? How will he fulfill his promise? And he does it in an unexpected way.

We're told that before either of them were born, God clearly determined, he would advance his plan through Jacob. Why? The simple answer is because God decided. Not because God knew they were so good or so bad, not because God looked ahead and saw, well, Jacob will be full of faith, therefore, I'll make my decision. The text clearly indicates that before anything had happened, before any work had been done, before any act of faith had been taken, God made a decision about how he would fulfill his promise and how he would advance his plan. And he called Jacob.



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Now, that word “call” is not an invitation. That word “call” is a choice. It is a summons. God chose Jacob freely, sovereignly, because he's absolutely in charge. God chose Jacob, and he did not choose Esau. That's why it says Jacob, I loved but Esau, I hated.

Now when we hear those words, we hear emotions, I think most often that's what we hear. We hear “Esau I hated,” and you want to say, he's still in the womb, why do you hate him when he hasn't done anything? And that's because we're imposing onto the text and onto the story an emotional definition of hate. You need to remember what Paul is doing here. He's talking about the plan and the purpose and the promise of God. And what Paul is clearly indicating when he says, and he quotes that Old Testament text, “Jacob, I loved, Esau, I hated,” is that God chose Jacob. God did not choose Esau. That's what love and hate means in this text and in the Old Testament prophecy. God chose Jacob. He chose that his plan and his promise would advance through Jacob. Jacob ultimately would become the one renamed—he is the one that is called Israel. And God, by his sovereign free choice, chose to move his plan forward in that way.

Now, let's just say, let's just acknowledge, this is tough stuff. This is hefty stuff. I can't tell you how many hours I have spent mulling over this very topic. How does this all work? My freshman year of college, I don't know that I got a lot of homework done, but I did talk about this a lot with my friends. It's complex. It's complex. And I think here we need to remember, this text is not about the inner workings of choice and predestination and election. All of it's there, but that's not the main point of the text. The main point of the text is this: God keeps his promises. God keeps his promises and he is in charge. There's no question. There's no question that as we consider the details, the technicalities of God's sovereign choice, there's no question it raises concerns for us. I absolutely acknowledge that.

And in fact, I think that for us, for our modern years, the way God works, at least in this case, with Jacob and Esau, it strikes us as a little bit unfair, doesn't it? Say what? Why would he do that? And the good news is, Paul anticipated that very question. That's what people were asking back then, that what people ask today. He anticipated that question, and he answers it in verse 14.

*14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?
[Answer:] May it never be!*

Is there any injustice with God? Is this fair? Is this the right way for God to work? Is God in the wrong for working that way? That's the question Paul is ultimately asking and then immediately answering, saying, “May it never be!”

I think as we consider the working of God, his sovereign plan, it's helpful for us to just remember Romans 1 and 2, what we've talked about throughout this book.



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See, we talk about fairness, and we think of it this way, we think fairness is when people get what they deserve. That's fairness. Then we remember Romans 1 and 2. We remember that all have sinned and fall short of the glory. Oh, glory of God, we remember that we all rebelled against God. And so if God were to act according to our definition of fairness, heaven would be empty. But God has poured out his mercy. God has chosen to act. God, full of compassion, acted in order to save some from their helpless estate.

See, it's so easy for us when we talk about God's plan, how he's moving everything forward, it's so easy for us to start to be thankful that he did it, but then start to, in our mind, criticize the way that he went about it. This ultimately is a call for humility. A call to remember that God is God, and we are not. We need to emphasize, we need to lean into, we need to focus on, his mercy and compassion as he moves his plan forward. That's precisely what Paul does as he gets to verse 15.

15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then, it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. 17 For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires.

Every passage is easier than the last, huh? The story of Exodus is such an incredible moment where it captures, in this conclusive moment in the life of Israel, the mercy and the compassion and the justice and the plan of God, all of it wrapped up in that story.

As we consider God rescuing Israel, let me ask you this question: did Israel deserve to be rescued? The answer is clearly they did not. Israel had not done anything that made them meritorious, that made them earn God's gracious act on their behalf. God did that purely as an expression of his love, his commitment, his fulfillment of his promises, and his compassion upon them. They did not deserve it. But God's grace poured out upon them and delivered them out of the hands of slavery.

Next question: did Pharaoh deserve the justice that was served? Answer, absolutely. Absolutely, Pharaoh was adamantly opposed to God. Pharaoh considered himself to be a god, a rival of God. Throughout that story, Pharaoh over and over again was callous towards God, would harden towards God. And what we learn in the book of Exodus is, the very end of that interaction, then God comes in and hardens Pharaoh's already hard and callous heart. And God came and served out justice and judgment to Pharaoh, who hated and rebelled against God.



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Now the question is: is that unfair of God? Is it unfair that, in his absolute freedom, Israel received mercy and Pharaoh received justice? Is it unfair that God fulfilled his promise in the way that, according to his wisdom and his knowledge, he saw fit? My answer would be, absolutely not. It's absolutely not unfair. It's totally fair, and it's 100% within the right and authority of God to do just that. If God looks at all and they are all undeserving, but God chooses to bless some with his mercy and compassion, that is absolutely God's privilege. He is free to do that.

But it does lead us to another question, and Paul takes us right there in verse 19. He says:

19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who resists his will?"

Logical question. If God's in charge of it all, it's all going according to his will, then why is anyone to blame? Paul answers the question in a surprising way at the beginning of verse 20. He says:

20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?

That's a blunt response, sharp response, from Paul. And I think ultimately it's a call to humility. It's "remember who we are and who we are not." God is in charge. We are not. God is infinite. We are finite. God is immortal in his very nature. We are mortal, prone to decay, only able to live in unending life with God because he grants it. We are finite. He is infinite. And in our helpless estate, God planned and promised and launched a rescue mission, and we are recipients of it. Paul says, who are you, O man? It's Paul's way of just naming the arrogance of that question—to look at the creator, the one that's in charge of everything, and to say, "I don't really care for how you're doing it."

Now, we can admit that is arrogant, but that it is in our heart, isn't it? In the same way that when we went through the Lord's Prayer, we said, we every once in a while want to get up on the throne and tell God, "We'll take it from here." We think we know better. Ultimately, the desperate situation and the beauty of dependence that we can step into is that we are not God, and he is. Humility is ultimately at its root, dependent upon God, trusting that he is the architect, he is in charge of it all. He makes decisions that I may not understand, but he remains trustworthy. He remains trustworthy.

Taking this idea of God being in charge, Paul now draws out a metaphor. End of verse 20, he says:



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20 The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

So now, God is the potter. That the metaphor. And the potter has an absolute right to do whatever the potter wants with the clay. That is Paul's point. And once again, it's a call to humility. It's a call to submission. Now Paul continues using this metaphor, but taking it a step further. He says in verse 22:

22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 23 And he did so to make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory,

Now there is a lot there, so let me just summarize it. Let me summarize Paul's question and then talk about some of the details. And let me assure you beforehand, I don't think I will adequately satisfy all your questions. This is difficult, difficult stuff. So Paul is essentially saying, does God not have the right to patiently endure those who those who are rebelling against him? Does he not have the right to withhold his wrath, knowing they are destined for hell? And does he not have the right to do that in order to show forth his mercy upon those who are saved, those who are his? Does God not have the right to do that? All of that is built into these verses.

It's very clear that when God, when Paul, refers to vessels of mercy, he's referring to those that belong to God, those who are saved, those who are his people. Everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ is a vessel of mercy, awaiting a glorious future, that God has prepared in advance. And he has come in and he has chosen us in order for us to experience glory with him. That is what it is to be a vessel of mercy. Vessels of wrath are more difficult. Obviously, vessels of wrath are those who have stubbornly resisted the call of God, but also are opposed to him, and are destined, because they are opposed to him, to what Paul described as destruction. Destined for destruction.

Now, there's no question this passage, these two verses, raise a huge question. And they could take us down a whole teaching on God's election and God's predestination, and we're going to resist that right now. But we do need to acknowledge what Paul is doing here and also shed a little light on what he's going to do in chapter 10. See, some people teach this passage as if God is equally active in preparing vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath. And they say, yeah, God's actively preparing both for both destinations. It's not what we believe or teach here at Lincoln Berean.



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Now, this is going to come ultimately in chapter 10 where the focus is going to become human responsibility within the entire economy or plan of God. We're gonna get there. But what's interesting is the language and the grammar here of vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy. What's very obvious is God actively plays a role in preparing vessels of mercy. It says, "which he prepared beforehand for glory."

But what's equally interesting is that God does not appear as an active agent when we come to talk about the vessels of wrath. It says, "much patience, vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction." It occurs in the "middle voice." Middle voice is something in Greek that means something like this: it's something that occurs, but I do it to myself. I do it to myself. So while the grammar indicates God actively prepares vessels of mercy, it also indicates there's an element where vessels of wrath are preparing their own destruction.

We believe that both of these things are equally taught in scripture. There's no question in Romans 9, God is sovereign. God is in charge. God is moving his plan forward. There's no question. And that should give us great confidence, great assurance. When our world feels chaotic, we never need to fear that God is out of control. He is not. Absolutely in charge. Knows what he's doing. He'll bring all of human events, all of civilization, to the outcome that he has chosen to bring it to. And we believe the Bible simultaneously teaches that we as human beings have been given responsibility, that the call goes out to us and we do need to choose.

And if you ask me right now, how does that all work together? My answer is, I don't quite know. About 20 years ago, I thought I was gonna figure it out. But I didn't. When I was in college, I thought I was close. How arrogant. 2,000 years of debate, settled by a freshman in college. I don't know, but I do find great assurance in it. I do rest in the fact that God has given me responsibility. Every day I need to wake up, I need to choose to follow him, choose to submit to him. And somehow within the mind of God, according to his wisdom and knowledge, somehow he is sovereignly superintending it all. And I can find great confidence in that.

God is marching forward. He has his plan. He is bringing it to pass. He fulfills his promises. And he has promised that he will make for himself a people from among the Jews and from among the Gentiles, one people, worshiping God and God alone, God himself dwelling among them. The most glorious inhabitants, Jew and Gentile alike, worshiping him. And that's precisely where Paul ends this chapter. Bringing us, us Gentiles, into the picture and helping us understand.

Bringing Gentiles in was always part of God's plan. Bringing Gentiles in is a fulfillment of what God planned. Verse 24, Paul says:



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24 even us, whom he also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

Now he gives us three prophecies, verse 25.

25 As he says also in Hosea, "I will call those who are not my people, 'my people,' and her who was not beloved, 'beloved.'" 26 "And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'you are not my people,' there they shall be called sons of the living God." 27 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; 28 for the Lord will execute his word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly."

And finally, verse 29:

29 And just as Isaiah foretold, "Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah."

Three prophetic texts, all describing different aspects of God's foreordained plan and how God fulfills his plan. The text of Hosea makes it abundantly clear that God planned to act so that Gentiles, those who were not his people, would become his people. Those who were not his people would be called sons of the living God, children of God. It was always part of God's plan to bring in Gentiles.

Then that first part of the Isaiah text, makes it clear that, although God's people, Israel, numbered as many as the sands of the seashore, God will work with a remnant of his choosing. God will save a remnant, building for himself his people.

Finally, the last text just signifies that were it not for God's hand, there would be no people of God left. And that's just absolutely a statement of fact. Were it not for God's intervention in every single person who calls him Father, were it not for God intervening, everyone would be lost. Everyone would meet the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. God's mercy and compassion is all that can save from that destination, all that can save from that outcome.

This is a complex text. So the question is, what do we do with it? I just want to suggest two steps or two pieces of application. The first is this, if you belong to God—it is to worship and thank him. Be filled with overwhelming gratitude for his mercy and compassion upon you.

Now, I will admit to you, I don't understand why God saved me or how he saved me. What did I do? And the answer is, I did nothing. I can't work out all the dynamics. I don't understand exactly how, in the mind of God, it all came to pass the way it did.



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But I know that it did, and because it did, I will give him thanks. He saved me. He made me his. He saved you. He made you his. And for that, we are to well up in worship and gratitude and praise.

The second point of application is to take heart, to walk full of courage. God has given us audacious promises. He told us in Romans 8 that if you are in Christ, you will never be separated from his love. And because God is faithful, and because God is in charge of all things, we can count on it. He is faithful. He is a promise keeper. He is in charge and he will never let you go.

Our Father, we thank you. We thank you that you, in your wisdom, sent your son to die on our behalf, that we might worship you and be called your children, today, every day, and forever. Lord, we acknowledge we don't understand all of this. This is difficult for our small minds. But Lord, what I ask is that you will fill us with confidence and courage because we don't have to have it all figured out—you do. And we are thankful for that. So, Lord, help us to praise and help us to walk with confidence, because you are faithful and you are in charge. We pray these things in your name, amen.

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