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MESSAGE: Mercy to All
PASSAGE: Romans 11
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

In the city of Mumbai, India, there is a slum that is called Dharavi. By many estimates, it's the largest slum in the world, just one square mile, but packed into that one square mile, there are over 700,000 people, crammed into just over 90,000 individual dwellings. It is a virtual maze of corridors and passageways, completely chaotic and confusing, humanity and concrete piled, difficult to navigate.

In the year 2015, I had the privilege to go to India, been able to go on a number of occasions in my role as a pastor of global outreach. And while I was there, I had the opportunity to go through Dharavi Slums, able to navigate the confusion of that slum on a rainy afternoon, and I can tell you, I navigated it with absolute confidence. Now, I did so knowing, knowing that if I took one wrong turn, I might not get out. It's that kind of place.

But I was confident because of this: I was with someone who knew the way. And I trusted them. And that made all the difference. They knew the way, and I trusted them. And so they could guide me through the confusing maze that was that slum.

For a number of weeks now, we've been looking at some very difficult, very complex chapters in the book of Romans, Romans 9 to 11. Deep, complex theology about God and his ways. And I would suggest to you this evening that whether we are talking about understanding the complexity of God's ways, or we are talking about making sense of his plan in our own life, our hope and our confidence does not come from having it all figured out. It comes from trusting that he knows what he is doing and he can lead us through. That's where we find hope.

But that poses a question to us: Will we trust God? Will we believe him? That's what we want to consider tonight. Open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 11. Romans chapter 11. As you turn there, we are covering the entire chapter. We are going to move pretty quickly, hopefully. And we are going to try to make sense of what is a very dense, very debated chapter.

Now as you turn there, let me just summarize where we've been, going all the way back to Romans 9, verse 6. That started this whole conversation, and in that verse,



lincolnberean

Paul answers the question that he was struggling with. In light of the fact that so many of his Jewish brothers and sisters, those who were ethnically Israel, in light of the fact that they had a persistent unbelief, they didn't embrace the gospel—had God failed at keeping his word? That was Paul's question.

He answered it immediately and emphatically in Romans 9, verse 6. He says it is not as though the word of God has failed. In chapter 9, he clearly highlighted two things. First, God never promised that he would save every single Jewish person. That wasn't part of the Old Testament promise. Second, God sovereignly was moving his plan forward and he was continuing to work with what Paul referred to as a "remnant," a group within ethnic Israel who believed, embraced, the gospel. God was moving his plan forward.

As we looked at Romans 10, then, we looked at the other side of this conversation, at human responsibility. And what became very clear is that the reason, the explanation, for why so many among Israel were not entering into the blessing of God was because they didn't believe. They persisted in unbelief. In Romans 10, Paul essentially said, it's not that God has failed, it's that many in Israel, and still today, many yet have failed to embrace the grace of the gospel. God hasn't failed; people have failed to believe.

So now, as Paul continues in Romans 11, he's going to continue his explanation of his unfolding plan of God, how the gospel is moving forward. But he begins again with coming back to a question, a question that really highlights the primary issue that he brought up at the beginning of chapter 9. So Romans 11, verse 1, we're going to read all the way through to verse 10. So Paul says:

1 I say then, God has not rejected his people, has he? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Or do you not know what the scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 3 "Lord, they've killed your prophets, they've torn down your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." 4 But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. 7 What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it [that's the remnant], and the rest were hardened; 8 just as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day." 9 And David says, "let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. 20 Let their eyes be darkened and see not, and bend their backs forever."



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Romans 9, verse 6. Has God's promise failed? Has he failed to keep his word? Answer, no. Now, at the beginning of chapter 11, Paul asks another question, but it is a more desperate question. Has God rejected his people? Has God rejected Israel? Is he done with them or is there hope for those countrymen of Paul, those who are ethnically Jewish, his fellow Jews? And Paul's answer serves as a reminder once again that while many, in fact, most of those who were ethnically Jewish in Paul's day had rejected the gospel, not all had.

God had maintained for himself, had saved for himself, a remnant. There were some who believed, and that some includes Paul. Paul is essentially looking at himself and saying, God hasn't rejected Israel. I'm an Israelite. I'm a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. In other words, Paul answers, how can we say that God has rejected his people, if I, one of his people, are caught up in the works of God, have given my life to the Messiah? I'm one of God's children, continuing on, persisting with him. Paul is saying, look at me.

Now, we can't only forget that we can only look at Paul. We also can look at the early church. The first mega church in history was a Jewish mega church in the heart of Jerusalem, led by James, the brother of Jesus. The gospel went out from Israel, and thousands of Jews believed. But there's no question something had changed in Paul's wrestling with that. But he is clearly, emphatically, saying God has not rejected his people. He saved himself a remnant, just as he did in the days of Elijah.

Now, I think Paul probably saw in himself and his own life a little bit of a scenario that was like what Elijah experienced. You know, both Paul and Elijah, they faithfully proclaimed the good news, the truth in the face of massive unbelief among their fellow Israelites. Paul proclaimed the good news of the grace of God in the gospel through Jesus Christ. Elijah came and called Israel, the people of God, to turn back to repent of their idolatry. Paul desired that his Jewish brothers and sisters would cease worshiping anyone other than the Messiah, Jesus, the savior of the world.

Both of them paid dearly for their message. And while they clearly were in the minority, they were not alone. God told Elijah, I have saved for myself seven thousand who would not bow the knee to a false God. God had saved a remnant. Paul says clearly, in the same way, in Paul's present moment, God had sovereignly chose to preserve a remnant for himself from among ethnic Israel. But God had also chosen to harden some, to harden them in their disbelief.

Now, Paul continues in verse 11. He says:

11 I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they?



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Paul's question here is essentially, does God still have plans for his Jewish brothers and sisters? Does he still have a plan for ethnic Israel? Or have they failed so much that the failure is final? That's his question, that's his concern. So he continues at the end of verse 11. He says:

11 May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles to make them jealous. 12 Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! 13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Life from the dead. God has not rejected his people. He is working with a remnant, but clearly what Paul is saying is that God is using Israel, ethnic Israel's current unbelief, to advance his plans—to bring the gospel to the nations, what the Bible refers to as the nations, the Gentile people. Their transgression, Paul says, is riches for the world. Riches for the world. Their failure is riches for the Gentiles. In other words, God is still working with them. They are still a part of the plan.

We can admit, however, that they're part in the plan in the moment in which Paul is speaking is confusing. We can admit that. But none of that leads Paul to give up hope. Paul hasn't given up hope. Instead, he understood that what God was doing among the Gentiles would ultimately be used in the very purposes of God to stir up spiritual envy among his Jewish brothers and sisters.

Isn't that interesting? Paul is saying as they see God blessing, pouring out blessing through belief in the gospel, upon the Gentiles, that will awaken something in them that will say, wait a second—we want to get in on that! They'll stir up spiritual envy. That's exactly what Paul hoped for in his own ministry, that they'd become spiritually envious, and they would repent, and they would believe, and they would be saved.

And this is why Paul says he magnified his ministry. He made much of it. He didn't hide it. He wasn't ashamed of it. He, Paul's, philosophy of ministry is he clearly was the apostle to the Gentiles, and so he went throughout the world proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. But he also, at the same time, had a secondary purpose. He hoped that by the grace of God, his work among the Gentiles would stir up spiritual envy in his fellow Jews, and somehow that would result in God saving some of them. That's what he was praying. That's what he was hoping.



lincolnberean

Now, Paul anticipated that coming moment, and that's what he references in verse 15. He anticipated a moment when God would turn the heart of his Jewish brothers and sisters back to him, that they would embrace the gospel. They'd be accepted by God. And in that moment, Paul said, if their rejection has meant reconciliation for the world—in other words, their rejection meant the gospel went out to the Gentiles—what will their acceptance when they put their faith in God and God accepts them, what will it mean, except, he says, life from the dead?

Now life from the dead is a rare word from Paul. It's a rare phrase. But I believe ultimately what he's referring to here is that glorious moment that fills us as believers with hope. That even when we say goodbye to someone, when someone passes away and we put their body in the ground, that is not the final word. Because God will one day, when Jesus returns, God will raise that body up, will resurrect that person by his very power. And they will come and be with God, glorified, in the new heavens and new earth. That's the hope.

And Paul's referring to the New Testament reality of resurrection. In Romans 8, he refers to it as God redeeming our mortal bodies. In other words, Paul is saying he believes, he anticipates, a moment when Jewish brothers and sisters of his will turn, will repent and be accepted. And that will be the moment when God fulfills all things. That's what he's looking forward to.

So again, in summary, the mass rejection of the gospel among most of the Jews in Paul's day had resulted in the mass embrace of the gospel by the Gentiles. But none of that means, even though that's the reality on the ground in the first century, none of that means that Paul or anyone should lose hope for his fellow countrymen. Paul indeed is full of hope. He's full of hope, we're going to see that as we continue on.

Now, as he continues in verses 17 to 24, he is going to tell us the reason for his hope and he's going to do that by way of a long metaphor. He introduces two metaphors in verse 16, but then he expands on one of them in verses 17 to 24. So verse 16, he says:

16 If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.

Now this is what he expands on, and this is going to be where we focus our attention. He continues in verse 17:

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you [that is, he's speaking to Gentiles as a group of people, and you], being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are



lincolnberean

arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you, either. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in his kindness; otherwise, you also will be cut off. 23 And they also [going back to the natural branch that was cut off, and they also], if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

Clear as day! So first, I think we need to pay attention to Paul's pastoral tone. He has a pastoral tone, a pastoral concern, in this paragraph, and that pastoral concern has to do with arrogance. Conceit. I think sometimes we forget what a major problem in the early church arrogance was, a sense of superiority was.

From the very first days, there was a problem, and we see it all over the book of Acts. The Jewish believers, the members that made up the majority of the church when it began—you know, that church in Jerusalem was over three thousand people, nearly 100% of whom were Jewish. They struggled with a sense of superiority over the Gentiles. That was a major hurdle for them. Paul had to talk with Peter about this very idea. A sense of arrogance, a sense of being better than—that was a struggle.

But now what Paul sees is something interesting has happened, something unexpected. His concern is that now there is arrogance that goes the other direction. Because the proclamation of the gospel has been so successful in the Gentile world, the Gentiles now had become arrogant towards the Jews, who were now a minority. Now they had a sense of superiority. Look at God, look what God did with us, look how good we are. So in these verses, Paul essentially offers a strong warning against arrogance to the Gentile Christians that were in that Roman church that would have been made up of both Gentile and Jewish Christians.

Now why is arrogance so out of place among the people of God? The answer is because it is completely contrary to grace. It's completely contrary to Grace. Grace means God acts first. God initiates. It's God's action, none of our action. In light of that, where is there room for boasting? Where is there room for arrogance? A proper understanding of grace, a realization that it is all God, is an antidote to arrogance, to a sense of superiority.



lincolnberean

Arrogance had cropped up among the Gentiles. And so Paul had to remind them of the truth, and to do that, he uses this fairly straightforward metaphor. It's a little foreign to us because we aren't cultivating olive trees like they are throughout the Middle East. But I don't think it's impossible to understand what he's saying.

He's saying, God has a tree. God planted a tree, an olive tree. It's one tree and it represents his people. The root of that tree goes all the way back to his interactions with Abraham and Isaac, and with Jacob—these people in whom and through whom he promised he would build a people that ultimately would bless all people that would bless the entire world.

God has a tree. Its roots are the patriarchs, the Friends of God, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So the tree grew, started to grow branches. But what Paul says is, due to unbelief, some of the natural branches, that is, those who are ethnically Israel ethnic Jews, some of them were cut off, Paul says. They were broken off. And wild branches from a wild olive tree were grafted in places. That's the Gentiles. God grafted in the Gentiles. They were brought in to the people of God.

Now “grafting in” is this process of taking a branch that's broken off and finding a way to fix it to a trunk of a tree. And eventually, and this is very common with olive branches, eventually that branch becomes a part of that tree, fully a part of it, fully incorporated. Using that imagery, what Paul is clearly saying is that the wild branch of the Gentiles, all the people to whom he's talking about and warning about arrogance, they were grafted in and they are sustained by the root of the tree, by what God did, with the forefathers, and therefore they have zero room to boast.

A wild branch that is grafted in to a tree that existed before that wild branch was grafted in, has no room for arrogance, no room for boasting. The Gentiles were brought in purely as an act of the kindness of God, the grace of God, and it was received by faith. No room for arrogance. No room for arrogance. In the same way, in the same way, why have the natural branches been cut off? Has nothing to do with their ethnicity. It's not what it's about. Had to do with their unbelief. Because of their unbelief, God cut the natural branches off.

Therefore, Paul's warning is this. First, grace means we cannot be arrogant as believers. The Gentile Christians in Paul's world could not be arrogant. They had to embrace humility, which acknowledges full dependence upon God, because God is the full initiator. The only reason any Gentile is included in the family of God is because of God's kindness.

Now individually, just as a point of application, the only reason any of us are included in the family of God is because of his kindness to us. It's not because of the family we grew up in. Because of God's kindness. We didn't come in with a



lincolnberean

bunch of spiritual credit and say to God, "Look how great we are, and that's why you should accept me and not this person. That's why I can feel a little superior to this person." That attitude has no place in the church.

Now Paul also warns, be on guard against arrogance. Strive to be people who live by faith in God, not beginning to trust that somehow by virtue of who I am, how I was born, my ethnicity, anything like that, that I have anything to give to God. I have nothing, I have to be purely a recipient of his grace. Paul offers a warning. And a rebuke.

But as he continues, he also offers this further explanation of God's plans for the natural branches by extending that metaphor. Paul is saying clearly that, listen, if God can graft in a wild branch, then it is no problem for him to graft a natural branch back in. Not hard for God. And so God can easily, with his people Israel, God can easily graft them back into the people of God, if, Paul says, they do not continue in unbelief. Paul anticipated that day. Part of his ministry was aimed at stirring up that jealousy that would cause his brothers and sisters to repent.

See, Paul believed God was not done with his countrymen. He believed that there would come a day where the tide of unbelief that marked the majority, there'd be a moment where the tide would turn, be a moment where the tide would turn. Verse 25, he continues. He says:

25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation [there's that call to humility again, now here's what he says]—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The deliverer will come from Zion, he will remove ungodliness from Jacob. 27 This is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they may also now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.

Paul begins in verse 25 by saying he doesn't want them to be uninformed of this mystery, and that word is a good word for us to hold on to. As we talk about these verses. Because they are quite challenging, very debated. There's no verses in Romans, really, that are more debated than verses 25 and 26, so I want to do our best. We don't have time to get into all the details, but I want to do our best to understand the big picture.



lincolnberean

So when Paul uses this word mystery, often he's using it in his writings as referring to something that was hidden, but now it's been revealed. Here, it seems as though he's talking about something that is yet to come, describing what we could call the order, or the sequence of events, in God's unfolding plan of gospel expansion, how things are going to move forward.

So verse 25 and 26 include some of what we've heard already. We've heard it in chapter 9, 10, and in the beginning of 11. But there's also a few things that are a little new, there's some new information. So here's the order that he just described in verses 25 and 26. Some of this was what we've already talked about.

First, many, in fact, at the time, most, of those who are ethnically Israel have been hardened in unbelief. They haven't embraced the gospel. He's talked about that. God has saved a remnant, but the majority have been hardened. Second, that's resulted, by the grace of God and according to his plan, in the gospel going out to the Gentiles and in the Gentiles taking it up and believing it. Now all of that's been adequately covered. God's using that to stir up envy.

But then the third and fourth steps, so to speak, they are new. And so he says this. There will come a time—and he's using time language, he says things like “until” and “have happened”—there will come a time when the fullness or the full number of the Gentiles will have come in. And then finally, after that, he says, and so all Israel will be saved.

Now that's where all the debate lies, is on those last steps. Last two steps are new in the order. So the question is, what do they mean? And I'm just going to humbly say to you, I'm going to do my best to describe them. But I also can acknowledge we could do a full seminar on this for a full week, and it probably wouldn't be adequate. In fact, I wrote out and I wrote down a full explanation of all of it, and I thought, we will be here till 9.30. I don't think anyone wants to do that. Volleyball starts at 8, you know.

There are six basic understandings, especially of the end of or the beginning of verse 26, where he says, so all Israel will be saved. There are six ways, very good, very faithful evangelical scholars that would happily be at home in our church, interpret that phrase. Now, I only say that just to say, there are ways of interpreting this. This is a colossally challenging text. And if you're interested and you want to hear all the details, I'm more than happy to talk about that with you, okay? But what I'm going to offer you here is just my understanding, my studied understanding, of what Paul is saying.

So here's what I understand him to be saying. At some point in the future, according to the sovereign hand of God, the very sovereign choice and plan of



lincolnberean

God, there will come a moment when the fullness of the Gentiles will come in to life with God. We'll be grafted into the tree, so to speak, to the one people of God. The fullness of the Gentiles seems to suggest there's a number. That number will be met. Then, after that, God will work in the heart of those who are ethnically Israel, those who are ethnically Jewish, and there will be in some sense a revival among that people. A revival and a mass turning to Jesus and surrendering to him and being saved. That moment will be large. It will be shocking. It will be large enough that Paul is fully justified to describe it in terms of saying "all Israel." But I don't believe he means every single Jewish person.

Now here's why. Whenever that phrase is uttered in the Old Testament, it always is a representative phrase that refers to Israel as a people, but it doesn't necessarily refer to every single Israelite. And so in the same way that in chapter 9, verse 6, Paul says, not all those who descended from Israel are Israel, I believe what Paul is describing here is a massive revival in the future among those who are ethnically Israel, those who are ethnically Jewish, putting their faith in Jesus Christ.

And it will be an astounding moment. And when that moment comes, Jesus is right on the door. That's what I believe Paul's describing there. That's my understanding. I know there are very faithful people that disagree, and I can admit to you, all six positions have something good going for them. None of them are outrageous. All of them make a case biblically.

Now, on this topic, some questions immediately arise. First one is, when will this happen? Answer, nobody knows. No one knows. Bible's not clear on that. God doesn't want us to know that. Second question, how many how many Gentiles, and those who are ethnically Jewish, how many will be saved? No one knows. That's God's business.

I also want to say that the answer to the question is important, how? By what mechanism will they be saved? And we need to hold fast, that Romans makes it abundantly clear, they will be saved by putting their faith in Jesus Christ. God has one tree, one people of God, and he brings people in now in this day through faith in the Son of God who died for us and gave himself up for us and rose from the dead and now lives and sits supreme at the right hand of the Father.

Last question, why would God do this? The text does give an answer to that question. Because of God's relationship with the patriarchs, kind of what it says, they are beloved, Paul said, by God's choice for the sake of the fathers. And I know it's not very technical, but I almost hear that like this: Because God is Abraham's friend, and he is going to save and fulfill his promise to the ethnic people that descended from Abraham, God's going to save his people because of his love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



lincolnberean

Now each week, each week, we've emphasized the absolute freedom of God, and I've acknowledged each week, this is dense stuff, we can get pretty lost and lose the forest for the trees. It's very easy to do that, but tonight, as we conclude, I want to point us to the way Paul concluded there. Paul pointed to the fact that God sovereignly moves his plan forward. And he does so through his sovereign choice and through his mercy. Our God's character is that he is full of mercy. He saw the sin that bound all people fast, and he reached out in mercy. Last week, it says he extended his arm to an obstinate and resistant people. Our God is full of mercy.

And through the gospel, he has shown mercy to all people. And the biblical way of talking about all people is to say the Jews and the Greeks or the Gentiles. That's everybody. God has made his mercy known through the gospel through sending his son, Jesus Christ. And as we conclude, my heart's desire is that what we would lean on is the plan of God that marches forward, and the mercy of God that extends grace to us.

Now we're coming to the end of these chapters. We have a few more verses to read. We're going to read those in just a moment. What I do just want to ask, you know, it's Saturday night. Monday is coming. And I do think these are the kind of chapters where you just say, what difference does any of this make? I have crops to harvest and spreadsheets to write and emails to send. What do I do with this?

I think it's a really good question. This is pretty abstract stuff. And my encouragement to you is that the application isn't "go do something," it is "believe something." To believe that as we're walking through the complexities of life, even when we're trying to understand God's plan and we quite can't quite make sense of it, when things are happening in your life and you just aren't sure, how does this fit into the overall plan of God, our hope and confidence, as we said when we started, is not found in us being able to work it all out and understand all the details.

Our hope is found in believing that God is trustworthy. Believing that he has worked it all out. Believing that he is merciful. Believing that he can guide us through the twists and the turns that life is going to bring us. And as we can't quite understand all the complex twists and turns of his ways in the world, we can say, but we are with you. Therefore, we know you're going to bring us through. That's my hope.

And that's how Paul ends this chapter. We mentioned it our very first week, this hymn of praise, awestruck praise, from Paul. Just dwelling on the mind of God. So I'm going to close by reading it. And I'm not going to seek to explain it or exposit it. My hope is that you can hear it and absorb it. Even that you might feel it, because our feelings don't make something true, but often when we hear what is true, it



lincolnberean

brings feelings with it. So my hope is that these words are an encouragement. So Paul says in verse 33:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and unfathomable his ways! 34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became his counselor? 35 Or who has first given to him that it might be paid back to him again? 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Our Father, we do praise you for your abundance of wisdom, your mind that is bigger than our mind, your ways that are bigger than our ways. And Lord, as we work our way through life, seeking to follow you, we pray that the overwhelming characteristic of who we are as your people would be humble dependence upon you, gratitude that you have grafted us in. We are part of your holy and righteous people of faith and believe that no matter what we are encountering, you are faithful, and you are able to bring us through safely. We thank you that all these things are in your hands. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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