

Marriage and Divorce

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Date: 25 October 2015

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn back to Matthew's Gospel. We're going to look for a short time at this sermon, at these passages of God's Word on this subject and we're going to sing, we have more singing to do at the end of the service, I want to sing two songs at the end of the service, but just for now we're going to focus on God's Word and what Jesus says in these short, challenging verses. So marriage and divorce is the theme for tonight. Now you may have thought reading these two verses, it would just be divorce, it seems to focus heavily on divorce, but I do want us to keep in mind that we're talking about marriage and divorce. It's very important.

So Jesus's words, as they are, right the way throughout this sermon that he preaches, are a challenge. You can't escape that. If you're somebody who's reading the Bible for the first time, if it's new to you, or if you're somebody who is reading it for the nth time, it should still be a challenge to you when you read. And that was the case also in Jesus's day. Now these words that Jesus speaks in these two short verses were hugely challenging for the people that he spoke to. We'll come back to look at that soon. Why was that the case? Jesus speaks into a culture where the law of God was kind of managed, those who kind of taught the people, managed it and manipulated it to make it manageable for themselves. And what Jesus demands of them seems so challenging, seems more than they can, they think should be expected. And so he provokes by what he says. And it's also the case, isn't it, that what he says would provoke in our society. Think broadly about what our society says about divorce-marriage relationships generally, and indeed about the way that we make decisions about these kind of things. What Jesus says, the way that he proclaims authoritatively on issues such as this, which are so close to our hearts, the way that we conduct ourselves and our relationships, is hugely provocative. But it's what we really need to hear, and it's a real blessing to be able to hear the teaching of Jesus on this subject. So I want to just look at three main points tonight. I want to just for a while look at what Jesus actually says and means, and then think more broadly about marriage, and then ask the question at the end, well, how do we follow what Jesus says? How is it possible for us to do that? So first of all, what does Jesus say? See, in verse 31, read there with me. Jesus says, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. What does Jesus say? What does he mean by that particular statement?

Well, he says that the first thing that he says is that a man may divorce his wife for adultery. Now you think, okay, so far so expected. That's the case today. That's a statement that we may think is reasonably unremarkable and something that you would expect Jesus to say. Somebody has been wounded by that act. If somebody has been betrayed, if you like, then he permits, gives permission for this person to be divorced. But then he goes on and he takes things further. He says, if he divorces her for another reason, he causes her to commit adultery. He broadens the whole thing open and he does that very deliberately because that's the question that was going on. That's the kind of thing that people were trying to get him to talk about. One of the things that they were interested in, his interpretation of the law, they would see Jesus as this person who's come amongst them and who's challenging.

They didn't quite understand. He was threatening and they say, what does he say on this issue? And so the question of on what basis may somebody be divorced is a question that they were interested in. So they come to Jesus and Jesus is aware of this question and Jesus takes their expectations further and challenges them and says, everyone who divorces his wife, everyone who divorces his wife except on this ground, causes her to commit adultery. So why does he say that? Well it follows on from the passage that's just come. So you remember that last week Jesus was preaching on the issue of lust, sexuality. And Jesus knows, remember this, Jesus knows the people

he's speaking to. He's not just speculating or throwing out interesting thoughts into the ether and seeing which of them catch. He knows the people he's speaking to because he knows humanity because he's Lord of humanity. He's here incarnate, very unremarkable looking, but remember who he is when he speaks. He's the Son of God. And he said to them in this previous section, verse 27 to verse 30, all about the way that he knows that as they lived their lives, the challenge it was to look at somebody else and to desire that somebody else. And he also knows that what's happening in their culture, where divorce was actually pretty widespread, but it was pretty accessible to get a divorce, was that people were men were divorcing their wives on really flimsy reasons because somebody else had caught their attention. That was the reality going on in a lot of people's hearts and that's where Jesus starts and he exposes that reality. And the situation that they had was that people were able to get a divorce for very little reason. What's the background? How can you say that? That's why I read from Deuteronomy chapter 24. There were different schools of interpretation of the law and of the teachings from the Old

[6:01] Testament. You just flick back to Deuteronomy 24 just to clarify one thing briefly. Jesus picks up, he kind of refers really back in their thinking to a passage like this. And I just want to spend a little time on this just to understand this and then we'll move on to more just to see what he's really getting at here and to apply this. There's one thing that is correct in the culture that Jesus is speaking into in terms of the way that they do divorce. See verse one in Deuteronomy 24, when a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he's found some indecency in her and he writes in a certificate of divorce. Now you'll notice that he said in Matthew chapter five about the certificate of divorce. That's to stop divorce which God never instituted but which he permitted in certain situations. That was the whole thing of giving a certificate was to stop it becoming a free for all. So the divorce wasn't just something that people said almost, you know, off the cuff, you're divorced, I've had enough of you. And a kind of chaos reigned. There was this institution where somebody, if they were properly divorced, it would be properly done and somebody would be given a certificate and sent away. I was so that a woman who was divorced wouldn't be sent out into her new life kind of helpless as it were. She would have this certificate to go with her. So the practice that was around in Jesus's days procedurally was perhaps correct. But the big thing that Jesus wants to highlight is that their motivation for many of the divorces that were going on, the motivation behind what they were doing was all out of line. This takes us back to Deuteronomy 24 again.

Let me just read verse one again. When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he had found some indecency in her. Now that was the kind of heart and they seem to you like some random verse from Deuteronomy. You think what on earth has this got to do with anything with me? We'll get there. But these schools of thought that I mentioned, the kind of religious and legal teachers of the time, this was a huge controversy for them. What did it mean by saying some indecency? What did that mean?

What were the actual grounds upon which somebody could get divorced? So one school of thought would say conservatively something like sexual immorality, something like somebody who had been wayward in their behavior to a very serious level. Another school of thought on the other hand says, well if your wife displeases you, you can divorce her. If she messes up the dinner to put it crudely, you can divorce her. Now please, you can see how horribly dangerous and manipulative that is in a culture. If that strain of teaching is taken on by people and practiced. So into that kind of culture where divorce could be practiced for the flimsiest of reasons, Jesus comes and Jesus brings clarity with real force and power in the way that he teaches. And he says into that situation, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce, but I say that everyone who divorces his wife except on the ground of sexual immorality makes her commit adultery. In other words, if in this situation a man divorces his wife for no particular reason, sends her off effectively in the eyes of God, effectively according to the way God had instituted things and wanted things to be and wanted the people, his people to be living, that divorce had no real basis in the eyes of God. It wasn't founded. And so if that woman then went and married somebody else, her marriage to that person, her union with that person would be as if it was adulterous. It would in fact be adulterous. And so Jesus' words are sharp. They take hold of the people who are listening to him here because it may well have affected them. And Jesus is saying the way that you're conducting yourselves and in fact potentially the relationships, the marriages you have now are adulterous because you divorced your wife for no reason, for selfish reasons. You put yourself first. You manipulated the law

to please yourself. And really that's kind of the root of what Jesus is saying here. They were procedurally correct ethically and motivationally. They were all over the place, just all over the place. And isn't that so often the case with the people that Jesus is speaking to? And isn't that so often the case with us? Now isn't that why when we read the Sermon on the Mount, it's so valuable to us because so much of the Sermon on the Mount and the way that Jesus teaches is about interrelationships between people. Scan through the sermon. How much of it is about the way that we deal with each other, the way that we treat one another. And all the time of course we're remembering as we read something like that, the way that Jesus and the way that God would want us to think, where he would say, love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself. Now if the way you treat your wife is to just get fed up with her and to move her on as if she means nothing to you, then Jesus is saying you're morally and spiritually bankrupt. And then they needed to hear these words. So that's the challenge that Jesus brought into his own culture and his own context.

And it certainly provoked and of course this whole sermon provoked the way that people thought. Jesus' concern then is to provoke change, ethical change. A really important word for us to take away from this is reconciliation. Rather than just a kind of tyranny where the whim of the husband ruled or a capitulation where the slightest inconvenience in a marriage means forget about it, we just give it all up. Jesus wants reconciliation. He wants marriages to be what they should be. He wants progress and stability for people to work at a marriage.

[12:23] So he wants change. He wants ethical change. He also wants, and we see that as well, the whole need for reconciliation. Jesus is, if you like his exception clause where he says accept for sexual immorality, he doesn't even make that a demand. He doesn't say you have to divorce. But it's a grounds, it's permission for divorce if there's no reconciliation to be found there. And so God's word, when it speaks to us about the way that we interrelate, whether it's to do with marriage, whether it's to do with our relationships, seeks grace and mercy and reconciliation because that's what we're offered in the Gospel.

He also importantly protects and seeks the protection of those women who are being cast off, who are being treated like dirt. And the whole situation which was abhorrent to him was something that he wanted to deal with. And he makes the bar for divorce high. Now when we talk about divorce and we talk about the grounds for divorce, it's very complicated and it's very personal and it hurts very deeply to those who are affected by this who have been affected by it, who fear they're affected by it or will be affected by it.

Jesus, as we've seen, Jesus here makes this permission for those who have illicit relationships of some sort. And of course the Bible upholds that, the Bible upholds abandonment, those who are abandoned maybe by, if a couple have become Christian or one has become a Christian and the unbelieving partner says, I've had enough of this and leaves. The Bible speaks about that also. And there is also something to be said for those who are in the situation where their life, those who are married and their partner shows no sense of grace towards them, treats them as if they are not married to them, treats them as if the covenant that they made and the promises that they made mean nothing and there is no repentance and there is no attempted reconciliation. Dealing with these kinds of issues requires deep prayer and counsel but we need to seek reconciliation first. I read John Stott on a subject he was speaking about. He deals with divorced pastorally and he said that he won't speak to somebody about divorce if he's giving counsel. He will speak to somebody about divorce but he won't speak to somebody about divorce until he's first of all spoken to them about marriage and reconciliation. His priority is to go back to them again and say, let's talk again about what your marriage is before God. Have you forgotten that? Is it the case that you've just got so disenchanted with each other that you've stopped asking the Lord, how is it that you want us to be together and what does it mean, the marriage and the vows that we've taken and if things have broken down so far, can we be reconciled? That's the question that he wanted them to ask first of all and then he would talk about divorce if there was no reconciliation and of course that brings so much brokenness and so much hurt. But that's why I said at the start that I want us to think about marriage and divorce because as much as this is about Jesus teaching about divorce and challenging in his context and as much as it gives us guidance, a small amount of guidance but guidance nonetheless on divorce, it also implicates much about the way we should treat marriage and the priority of marriage to God and how important it is. Now, having said all that, I want to just acknowledge that that, I said at the start it was offensive and it was provocative in

Jesus's culture. Isn't that a hugely provocative thing to say here in Edinburgh? Now, for you to go out to your workplace or amongst your friends and share the Bible's teaching on this subject, it wouldn't go down well, I suspect. Let's just think about that for a minute. I want to give an illustration. It'll become relevant in a minute while you'll see why it's relevant. You've seen the film Lawrence of Arabia, you know the one I'm talking about, quite old films, always on at Christmas since about 16 hours long. If you've made it to the end, it's a good film actually, I don't want to put it down. There's a really interesting bit in the middle of it where this character Lawrence of Arabia, T. E. Lawrence, has to, he has a military mission and strategically as he sees it, the best way to affect that mission is to travel across a piece of desert that nobody thinks he can go across. The day Devils Anvil, they nickname it. And all the guys who he's with who are locals who know the place and the situation, tell him, you're crazy, we can't do that. But they do and they cross it. Sorry for spoiling the film. But when they get to the end of this extraordinarily deadly piece of desert, they notice there's one person missing. And all of the people say, well, he'll be dead. There's no way he's going to survive that. He's fallen off, he's obviously fallen off his camel in the desert, he'll die. And Lawrence says, no, you don't know that. I'm going to go back and get him. And the argument from his friend is it's written.

His time has come. Effectively, he's saying it's faded. It's written. It was in his fates. He's fallen off his camel and he's died. And the response to Lawrence gives, which is the point that I want you to remember is he says, nothing is written. Nothing is written. In other words, there's nothing prescribed. I will forge ahead with my plans and in this situation, I will go back and seek this man's life because I have the will to do so. And of course he does, he goes back and he finds the guy and he's alive and he rescues and he brings him to safety. And the conclusion of the group of the people that he's with is, well, for this man, nothing is written. He writes his own history. Now, the reason I mention that is because I think it chimes very much with the way people think today about ethics, about the way we conduct ourselves, about the way we do our lives. We decide how we're going to live, what principles we're going to follow, and we make our own story.

[19:11] Nobody's going to tell us how we should behave. We're going to decide. Nothing's written. It's very similar, I think, to the philosophical position which says your existence comes before your essence. So in other words, your existence, who you are as a person, isn't yet decided until you come into the world and you live your life. You make the choices that feel right to you. You self-determine who you want to be. You follow your heart and get there.

Now, I read a quote along these lines with regard to relationships and sexuality and marriage. Let me just read this. This is somebody, a celebrity who speaks on behalf, and in a context not just of the changes we've seen in our society, of the change of marriage and all the relationship changes that we've seen, but even changes in terms of gender, gender fluidity. So this is a celebrity commenting in one of our major daily newspapers. And ultimately Rose, that's the person just wants people to feel empowered to define their own identities and live their lives in a way that feels authentic. The takeaway is that only you know who you were born to be, she told Elle magazine, and you need to be free to be that person. That is a major strain of thought that many people today have. Maybe you do also. It's a way of thinking about life that says, the things that feel right to me are the things that I will follow. I'll make my own story. And nobody certainly know God in the Bible is going to tell me about the life decisions that I should make, who I feel I should be, who I should marry, the kind of boundaries that there are around marriage and the boundaries that exist around divorce. So it's very challenging to hear the biblical position. And you may be sitting there thinking, yeah, absolutely. And there's absolutely no way I would share what the Bible says about marriage and divorce with any of my friends. But here's the thing. The key thing when we think about ethics, behavior, the way we live our lives, of course, is who says what is right? Because who says is the key question, isn't it? Who has the authority to speak about these issues? What people want to be able to say today is I myself have the authority. I will decide the choices that I make. But the key point about this passage, the key point about what Jesus says here, the key point about the sermon is who is saying these words. Jesus absolutely rocks the boat in his own world. Because you see, all the people who are asking him the questions about the law, all the people who wanted him to explain his own position, Jesus came into their situation and he didn't just speak as another interpreter. He wasn't just another voice adding to the crowd. He didn't say, well, here's an interesting way of applying the Torah to our culture.

He defined the law. He was the one who gave the law. They are his laws. It is his way of living. He is the one who has defined the standard and the way that humanity should be.

And of course, as he comes as the fulfillment of the law, as the one who lived perfectly, and as the one who gave his life sacrificially and perfectly in a way that we never could do, he then defines this new kingdom ethic that he's describing in the Sermon on the Mount, this new way of living that his followers were to have. His followers were not to be people who kept external tech lists. But he was saying as the one who is the Lord and King, I want you to live as I live. I want you to live holy lives because I am holy.

[23 : 12] And so he challenges not only his own day, but he challenges us. And that is the claim he still makes today. But what we need to remember when we think about ethics, sexuality, relationships, marriage, divorce, all of these things is who is speaking and who is speaking is Jesus the King. And that's at the center of what we need to give consideration to when we think about this. Jesus the King is the one who speaks his words.

Now I want to speak just briefly about a little bit more about unpacking this. What can we say then about marriage and divorce? Let's apply this a little bit more. Manages according to God's word, according to God's desire, according to the way he knows us and he wants us to live, to be lifelong, committed. He knows that that will be hard work at times, but he wants us as we make our promises in marriage to remain faithful to those promises, to seek reconciliation where there is breakdown.

And so he asks us to commit. He asks us to commit to one another. Now for that, and we're going to look at this shortly, we need heart change. Those of us who are married know that. Being in a marriage relationship, being in any kind of human relationship, the friendships among you here at St. Columbus, the friendships you have with other believers, even long term friends that you have can be stretched at times, can't they? Things can be really difficult because we have a tendency to a selfish impulse, to want to do our own thing. And we clash with people. And so we're often heading down the line of adversity. But God seeks reconciliation and he seeks lifelong commitment. And we should seek also the flourishing of marriage. Much has been done to change marriage and many people now disparage marriage. We should seek the flourishing of marriage. And I mean that collectively as well, we should seek as a body of God's people to hold marriage high.

We should seek good marriages. We should seek to see blessing in marriages. Those who are married should seek to bless others, to be a blessing to those amongst whom they live.

And where the relationships that we have excel and therefore the blessing of others. And where we see discord, we don't hide from it. In our own relationships, we don't hide from it. We don't ignore it and just hope it will go away. We need courage and we seek prayerfully with the Lord's help to speak. I remember hearing my dad, my dad was a minister and he took a wedding, I was at one time and he said when he was addressing the couple, the kind of personal address apart from the ceremony, the main point he said was keep talking.

Keep talking to each other. And so sometimes that can be the hardest thing to do, can't it, when we're in a relationship and there's been a real, real disagreement and we feel aggrieved that the person doesn't understand us or they think differently or whatever it is. And the hardest thing to do can be to go back and say, okay, let's keep talking with grace prayerfully because what we want to feel like doing is walking away or shouting or whatever it is. So we need grace. And we also, I believe, need grace as a community to pray for those who are married, for those who are preparing to get married. And just to mention specifically, just for a minute, those who are married, I think it's really important to be aware of judgmentalism towards those who are divorced. So it may even be that those, there are those in St. Colombo's who feel this very keenly because they are divorced.

Those who are divorced are not stigmatized in our community. And it's very telling if those who are married are judging those who are maybe divorced or who see them and in their mind they sort of separate them out and they think, well, they were divorced and yet in their own marriages are living carelessly and without love and as if they're not prepared to consider their partner. So being judgmental, being hypocritical is a real danger. For those who are married, be aware of complacency and neglecting your marriage. But equally for those who are married, be aware of being insular. So marriages are not to be just for our own sense of ego to build us up, to make us feel good. Our marriages are there to make us strong so that we can be a blessing to others.

Gospel relationships which look outside and which do good to those who they are around. For those who, any who are divorced or any who you know who are in this situation, who feel that they can never come to church or come to Christ because of their situation. It is by no means the

unpardonable sin. By no means that God's grace is sufficient to cover all our sin, a multitude of sin. And those who have been hurt in this way, those who are hurting because they're the victim, we need to encourage and pray for them that they would come and receive healing and receive the comfort of God. Those who maybe feel a sharp sense of guilt because they have been very neglectful in their marriages, there is forgiveness for you also. There is forgiveness for those who've maybe made a complete mess of relationships and who've maybe caused great hurt. There is healing and there is forgiveness. Though there may be consequences and difficulty and brokenness as a result of what has happened. But all of that can be brought under the grace and the care of our Lord Jesus. And for those who are not married, who are sitting here and thinking, well this is irrelevant to me or it's not very thoughtful. Marriage is something, as I said before, I think it's really important for us not to think like islands, either as individuals or as married couples like little units that just float about individually. The New Testament speaks hugely of corporate life as a church, of body ministry.

[29 : 56] I'm going to read one verse. And so I'm asking for those who are single to pray for those who are married. There are times where we speak of all different kinds of aspects of church life. Sometimes it's those who are single, tonight our subject is divorce and remarriage.

And so pray for those who are single to consider those who are married, not as having all their problems sorted and having an easy life because that's not the case. But pray for those who are married, with all the challenges that they face and support them and care for them.

Those who are married should work together to care for those who are on their own, who are maybe bereaved, who are widowed or who are divorced or who are single. But it goes the other way too. Now let me read a verse in Galatians chapter 6. Very short verse, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. Well that speaks of the law of Christ, the law of love, as we mentioned earlier, loving the Lord your God and so loving your neighbour, not preferring yourself. So think about our lives and the way we relate to one another in terms of how we can do good to one another, how we can bless one another in the gospel, how we can encourage each other and build one another up. And I believe, I think God's word teaches us that increasingly as our society challenges what we believe more and more, we need to support and be practical with one another more and more and care for each other.

Final thing, very briefly. We haven't really asked this question yet. Why the big deal is so? Why does Jesus, why is it, this is a challenging word that Jesus brings and it seems like a heavy burden for him to put on us. Our relationships can be the most difficult thing, can't they? We can genuinely get to the point where somebody where we feel, I cannot connect with this person anymore, whether it be a friendship or a marriage relationship, any other kind of relationship that you may be in. We struggle with our relationships at times. Why does Jesus, why does God insist on this? What is the big deal about marriage?

We should consider marriage, think about it as reflecting the relationship that exists between you and me, the church and Jesus Christ. It's a reflection of that relationship, that intimate relationship that exists between Christ and his church. And so our relationships should, our marriages should reflect that. Let me read a short passage in Revelation 19.

[32 : 39] Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out hallelujah for the Lord our God, the almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. In verse 9, and the angel said to me, write this, blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Christians, that means you and me look forward to that day where we will be home with our Lord and that time is described in terms of a marriage feast where God's Christ's bride, the church, will be united with Christ the bridegroom and all of the celebration and all of the blessing that we will experience there. But that truth is reflected now in the saving relationship that you have with Jesus as a child of God, as one of his family.

He has called you into that relationship and we are collectively a small part of the fellowship which is the bride of Christ. That's the way in which God thinks of his people. The Bible uses different images, different picture language to describe the relationship that exists between Christians and the church and that is a precious one.

So consider Jesus in this biblical picture in some senses as like the ultimate husband.

He is the one who knows us fully. He knows us completely and that's a very difficult truth for us sometimes, isn't it? He speaks truthfully to us like nobody else does. So he just doesn't tell us platitudes about ourselves, doesn't just make us feel good.

[34 : 37] He tells us truly who we are. He speaks to us truly about our condition. But he is the one who is ultimately selfless. He speaks the truth about who you are and that is to show the hardness of your heart and the desperate need you have because before God you can't stand and yet he went to the cross. He was divorced. He was cut off. He experienced that time where he had to say, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And Jesus did that for his people. He was cut off.

And so then for those who trust in him, he is the ultimate security. Isn't that one of the things that we long for most of all in relationships is the security? One of the most horrible things about any kind of relationship breakdown, I suppose, is the way that it makes us feel adrift. Like we've been betrayed, all kinds of things go on there. The sense of broken trust and the sense of feeling insecure. And Jesus says, I have loved you with an everlasting love and I loved you so much that I was cut off for you and now I want you to remain in my love and I will hold you there forever because you're one of my people. Those are the words to Jesus's people, to Jesus's bride. They are the promises that he makes to us.

And so we are loved despite deserving divorce, despite deserving to be cut off and sent away, we are loved with an everlasting love. In Hosea chapter 3, the Lord said to me, go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods.

And so in all the bitterness and all the fragility of our relationships and all the times where we feel things are messed up, in all of the struggle we have to commit and to do what Jesus has asked us to do and to seek reconciliation and to move forward with the relationships we find so hard. We find hope and we find motivation in that truth, in the truth that it speaks to us about God. And we're motivated also of course in a wonderful verse. Let me just close with this from Ephesians chapter 5. Jesus's advice to husbands, husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. So this is a counter-cultural and at times it seems a counter-intuitive truth for us, doesn't it? And so we need to seek grace prayerfully and help. We need that on a very practical level and we need to understand also at the big level as we go to God and say, help me understand all that you have done for me and help me then in the relationships that I have to follow the way you want me to live. I'm going to pray and then we're going to sing. So let me just bow and pray. Lord God, we do ask you for help tonight because we know that relationships can be so difficult. I pray for Andy tonight who is really struggling in their relationship. Give them grace and give them love. And we pray that you would help us to work, be able to work hard at marriages. We'd be able to work hard at all the relationships that we have. That you would help us to be committed to this institution that you have given us. That you would help us to know grace if we feel like we've failed or if somebody has really failed us and we feel it really hurts. Thank you so much Lord Jesus that you were cut off for us. Help us to entrust ourselves to you and to know that you will never let us go. And we pray that you would help us now as we sing to you and as we give you praise in Jesus' name. Amen.