

Little Sins

A Sermon

(No. 248)

Delivered on Sabbath Morning, April 17th, 1859, by the

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at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

“Is it not a little one?”—[Genesis 19:20](#).

THESE words we shall take for a *motto*, rather than a *text* in the ordinary acceptation of that term. I shall not this morning attempt to explain the connection. It was the utterance of Lot, when he pleaded for the salvation of Zoar; but I shall take it altogether away from the connection in which it stands, and make use of it in another fashion. The great Father of Lies hath multitudes of devices by which he seeks to ruin the souls of men. He uses false weights and false balances in order to deceive them. Sometimes he uses false times, declaring at one hour that it is too early to seek the Lord, and at another that it is now too late. And he uses false quantities, for he will declare that great sins are but little, and as for what he confesses to be little sins, he makes them afterwards to be nothing at all—mere peccadilloes, almost worthy of forgiveness in themselves. Many souls, I doubt not, have been caught in this trap, and being snared thereby, have been destroyed. They have ventured into sin where they thought the stream was shallow, and, fatally deceived by its depth, they have been swept away by the strength of the current to that cataract which is the ruin of such vast multitudes of the souls of men.

It shall be my business this morning to answer this temptation, and try to put a sword in your hands wherewith to resist the enemy when he shall come upon you with this cry;—“Is it not a little one?” and tempt you into sin because he leads you to imagine that there is but very little harm in it. “Is it not a little one?”

With regard then to this temptation of Satan concerning the littleness of sin, I would make this first answer, *the best of men have always been afraid of little sins*. The holy martyrs of God have been ready to endure the most terrible torments rather than step so much as one inch aside from the road of truth and righteousness. Witness Daniel: when the king’s decree went forth that no man should worship God for such and such a time, nevertheless he prayed three times a day as aforetime, with his window open towards Jerusalem, not fearing the king’s commandment. Why could he not have retired into an inner chamber? Why might he not have ceased from vocal prayer, and have kept his petitions in his thought and in his heart? Would he not have been as well accepted as when he kneeled as usual, with the window open, so that all the world might see him? Ah! but Daniel judged that little as the offence might seem, he would rather suffer death at the jaws of the lion, than he would by that little offence provoke the anger of his God, or lead men to blaspheme his holy name,

because his servant had been afraid to obey. Mark, too, the three holy children. They are asked by king Nebuchadnezzar simply to bend the knee and worship the golden image which he had set up. How slight the homage! One bend of the knee, and all is done. One prostration, and they may go their way safely. Not so. They will not worship the golden image which the king has set up. They can burn for God, but they cannot turn from God. They can suffer, but they will not sin; and though all the world might have excused them with the plea of expediency, if they had performed that one little act of idol worship, yet they will not do it, but would rather be exposed to the fury of a furnace, seven times heated, than commit an offence against the Most High. So also among the early Christians. You may have read of that noble warrior for Christ, Martin Arethusa, the bishop. He had led the people to pull down the idol temple in the city over which he presided; and when the apostate emperor Julian came to power, he commanded the people to rebuild the temple. They were bound to obey on pain of death. But Arethusa all the while lifted up his voice against the evil they were doing, until the wrath of the king fell upon him of a sudden. He was, however, offered his life on condition that he would subscribe so much as a single half penny towards the building of the temple; nay, less than that, if he would cast one grain of incense into the censer of the false god he might escape. But he would not do it. He feared God, and he would not do the most tiny little sin to save his life. They therefore exposed his body, and gave him up to the children to prick him with knives; then they smeared him with honey, and he was exposed to wasps and stung to death. But all the while the grain of incense he would not give. He could give his body to wasps, and die in the most terrible pains, but he could not, he would not, he dared not sin against God. A noble example!

Now, brethren, if men have been able to perceive so much of sin in little transgressions, that they would bear inconceivable tortures rather than commit them, must there not be something dreadful after all in the thing of which Satan says, "Is it not a little one?" Men, with their eyes well opened by divine grace, have seen a whole hell slumbering in the most minute sin. Gifted with a microscopic power, their eyes have seen a world of iniquity hidden in a single act, or thought, or imagination of sin; and hence they have avoided it with horror,— have passed by and would have nought to do with it. But if the straight road to heaven be through flames, through floods, through death itself, they had sooner go through all these torments than turn one inch aside to tread an easy and an erroneous path. I say this should help us when Satan tempts us to commit little sins,—this should help us to the answer, "No, Satan, if God's people think it great, they know better than thou dost. Thou art a deceiver; they are true. I must shun all sin, even though thou sayest it is but little." It may be further answered, in reply to this temptation of Satan with regard to little sins, thus:—"Little sins lead to great ones. Satan! thou biddest me commit a small iniquity. I know thee whom thou art, thou unholy one! Thou desirest me to put in the thin end of the wedge. Thou knowest when that is once inserted thou canst drive it home, and split my soul in

twain. Nay, stand back! Little though the temptation be, I dread thee, for thy little temptation leads to something greater, and thy small sin makes way for something worse.”

We all see in nature how easily we may prove this,—*that little things lead to greater things*. If it be desired to bridge a gulf, it is often the custom to shoot an arrow, and cross it with a line almost as thin as film. That line passes over and a string is drawn after it, and after that some small rope, and after that a cable, and after that the swinging suspension bridge, that makes a way for thousands. So it is oft times with Satan. It is but a thought that he would shoot across the mind. That thought shall carry a desire; that desire a look; that look a touch; that touch a deed; that deed a habit; and that habit something worse, until the man, from little beginnings, shall be swamped and drowned in iniquity. Little things, we say, lead on to something worse. And thus it has always been. A spark is dropped by some unwary traveller amidst the dry grass of the prairie. It is but a spark; “Is it not a little one?” A child’s foot may tread it out; one drop from the rain-cloud may quench it. But ah! what sets the prairie in a blaze? what bids the rolling waves of flame drive before them all the beasts of the field? what is it that consumes the forest, locking it in its fiery arms? what is it that burns down the habitation of man, or robs the reaper of his harvest? It is this solitary spark,—the one spark—the breeder of the flames. So is it with little sins. Keep them back Oh Satan! They be sparks, but the very fire of hell is only a growth from them. The spark is the mother of conflagration, and though it be a little one I can have nought to do with it. Satan always begins with us as he did with Achan. He showed Achan, first of all, a goodly Babylonish garment, and a wedge of gold. Achan looked at it: was it not a little thing to do,—to look? Achan touched it: was not that a little thing? How slight a sin—to touch the forbidden thing! He takes it, and carries it away to his tent, and—here is worse,— he hides it. And at length he must die for the awful crime. Oh! take heed of those small beginnings of sin. Beginnings of sin are like the letting out of water: first, there is an ooze; then a drip; then a slender stream; then a vein of water; and then, at last, a flood: and a rampart is swept before it, a continent is drowned. Take heed of small beginnings, for they lead to worse. There was never a man yet that came to the gallows but confessed that he began with small thefts;—the stealing of a book at school—the pilfering, afterwards, from his master’s till leading to the joining of the gang of robbers,—the joining of the gang of robbers leading to worse crimes and, at last, the deed was done, the murder was committed, which brought him to an ignominious death. Little sins often act as burglars do;— burglars sometimes take with them a little child; they put the little child into a window that is too small for them to enter, and then he goes and opens the door to let in the thieves. So do little sins act. They are but little ones, but they creep in, and they open the door for great ones. A traitor inside the camp may be but a dwarf, and may go and open the gates of the city and let in a whole army. Dread sin; though it be never so small, dread it. You cannot see all that is in it. It is the mother of ten thousand mischiefs. The mother of mischief, they say, is as small as a

midge's egg; and certainly, the smallest sin has ten thousand mischiefs sleeping within its bowels.

St. Augustine gives a picture of how far men will go when they once begin to sin. There was a man who in argument declared that the devil made flies; "Well," said the man with whom he was arguing, "If the devil made flies, then it is but little more to say the devil made worms!" "Well" said the other, "I believe it." "Well" said the man, "If the devil made worms, how do you know but what he made small birds?" "Well," said the other, "It is likely he did!" "Well," resumed the man with whom he was arguing, "But if he made small birds, why may he not have made big ones? And if he made big birds, why may he not have made man? And if he made man, why may he have not made the world?" "You see," says St. Augustine, "By one admission, by once permitting the devil to be thought the creator of a fly, the man came to believe that the devil was the Creator." Just get one small error into your minds, get one small evil into your thoughts, commit one small act of sin in your life, permit these things to be dandled, and fondled, favoured, petted, and treated with respect, and you cannot tell whereunto they may grow. They are small in their infancy: they will be giants when they come to their full growth. Thou little knowest how near thy soul may be to destruction, when thou wantonly indulgest in the smallest act of sin!

Another argument may be used to respond to this temptation of the devil. He says, "Is it not a little one?" "Yes," we reply, "*But little sins multiply very fast.*" Like all other little things, there is a marvellous power of multiplication in little sins. As for murder, it is a masterly sin; but we do not often hear of it compared with the multitude of minor sins. The smaller the guilt, the more frequent it becomes. The elephant hath but a small progeny and multiplieth slowly. But the aphis hath thousands springing from it within an hour. It is even so with little sins: they multiply rapidly, beyond all thought—one becomes the mother of multitudes. And, mark this, little sins are as mighty for mischief in their multitude, as if they were greater sins. Have you ever read the story of the locusts when they sweep through a land? I was reading but yesterday of a missionary who called all the people together when he heard that the locusts were coming up the valley; and kindling huge fires, they hoped to drive off the living stream. The locusts were but small; but it seemed as if the whole of the blazing fires were quenched—they marched over the dead and burning bodies of their comrades, and on they went, one living stream. Before them everything was green, like the garden of Eden; behind them everything was dry and desert. The vines were barked, the trees had lost every leaf, and stretched their naked arms to the sky, as if winter had rent away their foliage. There was not then so much as a single blade of grass, or sprig upon the tree, that even a goat might have eaten. The locusts had done all this, and left utter devastation in their track. Why this? The locust is but a little thing! Ay, but in their number how mighty they become! Dread then a little sin, for it will be sure to multiply. It is not one, it is many of these little sins. The plague of lice, or the plague of flies in Egypt, was perhaps the most

terrible that the Egyptians ever felt. Take care of those little insect sins which may be your destruction. Surely if you are led to feel them, and to groan under them, and to pray to God for deliverance from them, it may be said that in your preservation is the finger of God. But let these sins alone, let them increase and multiply, and your misery is near at hand. Listen not then to the evil voice of Satan when he cries, “Is it not a little one?”

Years ago there was not a single thistle in the whole of Australia. Some Scotchman who very much admired thistles—rather more than I do—thought it was a pity that a great island like Australia should be without that marvellous and glorious symbol of his great nation. He, therefore, collected a packet of thistle-seeds, and sent it over to one of his friends in Australia. Well, when it was landed, the officers might have said, “Oh, let it in; ‘is it not a little one?’ Here is but a handful of thistle-down, oh, let it come in; it will be but sown in a garden—the Scotch will grow it in their gardens; they think it a fine flower, no doubt,—let them have it, it is but meant for their amusement.” Ah, yes, it was but a little one; but now whole districts of country are covered with it, and it has become the farmer’s pest and plague. It was a little one; but, all the worse for that, it multiplied and grew. If it had been a great evil, all men would have set to work to crush it. This little evil is not to be eradicated, and of that country it may be said till doomsday,— “Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth.” Happy would it have been if the ship that brought that seed had been wrecked. No boon is it to those of our countrymen there on the other side of the earth, but a vast curse. Take heed of the thistle-seed; little sins are like it. Take care they are not admitted into your heart. Endeavour to shun them as soon as Satan presents them. Go, seek by the grace of God and his Holy Spirit to keep them away; for if not, these little sins will multiply so fast, that they will be your ruin and destruction.

Once again; little sins, after all, if you look at them in another aspect, are great. *A little sin involves a great principle.* Suppose that to-morrow the Austrians should send a body of men into Sardinia. If they only send a dozen it would be equal to a declaration of war. It may be said, “Is it not a little one?—a very small band of soldiers that we have sent?” “Yes,” it would be replied, “but it is the principle of the thing. You cannot be allowed with impunity to send your soldiers across the border. War must be proclaimed, because you have violated the frontier, and invaded the land.” It is not necessary to send a hundred thousand troops into a country to break a treaty. It is true the breach of the treaty may appear to be small; but if the slightest breach be allowed, the principle is gone. There is very much more in principle than men imagine. In a sin against God, it is not so much the thing itself as the principle of the thing at which God looks; and the principle of obedience is as much broken, as much dishonoured by a little sin as by a great sin. O man! the Creator hath made thee to obey him. Thou breakest his law; thou sayst it is but a little breach. Still it is a breach. The law is broken. Thou art disobedient. His wrath abideth on thee. The principle of obedience is compromised in thy smallest transgression, and, therefore, is it great. Besides, I don’t

know whether the things Christian men call *little sins* are not, after all, greater than what they call *great sins*, in some respects. If you have a friend, and he does you a displeasure for the sake of ten thousand pounds, you say, "Well, he had a very great temptation. It is true he has committed a great fault, but still he has wronged me to some purpose." But suppose your friend should vex and grieve your mind for the sake of a farthing; what would you think of that? "This is wanton," you would say. "This man has done it out of sheer malevolence toward me." Now, if Adam had been denied by his Maker the whole of Paradise, and had been put into a stony desert, I do not think that, had he taken all Paradise to himself, there would have been more sin in that act, than when placed in the midst of the garden, he simply stole one fruit from the forbidden tree. The transgression involved a great principle, because he did it wantonly. He had so little to gain, he had so much to lose when he dishonored God. It has been said, that to sin without temptation is to sin like the devil, for the devil was not tempted when he sinned; and to sin with but little temptation is to sin like the devil. When there is great temptation offered, I do not say there is any excuse, but when there is none, where the deed is but little, bringing but little pleasure, and involving but a small consequence, there is a wantonness about the sin which makes it greater in moral obliquity, than many other iniquities that men commit. Ay, you cry out against a great felon, when he is discovered; see of how much he robbed men; see how he wronged the widow and robbed the fatherless! I know it. God forbid that I should make any excuse for him; but that man had a name to maintain. He had thousands of temptations before him to get immensely rich. He thought he never should be discovered. He had a family to keep. He had got involved in expensive habits, and there are many things to be said for his extenuation. But you, if you indulge in some slight sin which brings you no pleasure, which involves no important interests, by which you have nothing to get, I say you sin wantonly. You have committed an act which has in it the very virus and bitterness of wilful obstinate, designing disobedience, because there is not even the extenuation, or excuse, or apology, that you should gain something thereby. Little sins are, after all, tremendous sins, viewed in the light of God's law. Looked upon as involving a breach of that inviolable standard of right, and considered as having been committed wantonly, I say they are great, and I know not that those sins men conceive to be gross and great, are greater and grosser in reality than these.

Thus I have given you several arguments with which to answer that temptation, "Is it not a little one?"

Now I am about to speak to the child of God only, and I say to him, "Brother if Satan tempts thee to say, 'Is it not a little one?'" reply to him, "Ah, Satan but little though it be, it may mar my fellowship with Christ. Sin cannot destroy but it will annoy; it cannot ruin my soul, but it will soon ruin my peace. Thou sayest it is a little one, Satan, but my Saviour had to die for it, or otherwise I should have been shut out from heaven. 'That little one' may be like a little thorn in my flesh, to prick my heart and wound my soul. I cannot, I dare not

indulge in this little sin, for I have been greatly forgiven, and I must greatly love. A little sin in others would be a great sin for me—’ How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God.’”

Is it a little one, Satan? But a little stone in the shoe will make a traveller limp. A little thorn may breed a fester. A little cloud may hide the sun. A cloud of the size of a man’s hand may bring a deluge of rain. Avaunt Satan! I can have nought to do with thee; for since I know that Jesus bled for little sins, I cannot wound his heart by indulging in them afresh. A little sin, Satan! Hath not my Master said, “Take us the foxes, *the little* foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.” Lo! these little things do mischief to my tender heart. These little sins burrow in my soul, and soon make it to become a very den and hole of the wild beasts that Jesus hates, soon drive him away from my spirit so that he will hold no comfortable fellowship and communion with me. A great sin cannot destroy a Christian, but a little sin can make him miserable. Jesus will not walk with his people unless they drive out every known sin. He says, “If ye keep my commandments ye shall abide in my love, even as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” There are very many Christians in the world that do not see their Saviour’s face by the month together, and seem to be quite content without his company. I understand you not, nor do I wish to know how it is, that you can reconcile your souls to the absence of your Lord. A loving wife, without her husband for months and years, seems to me to be sorely tried. Surely it must be an affliction for a tender child to be separated from his father. We know that in our childhood it was always so, and we looked forward to our return home with joy. And art thou a child of God, yet happy without seeing thy Father’s face? What! thou the spouse of Christ, and yet content without his company! Surely, surely, surely, thou hast fallen into a sad state. Thou must have gone astray, if such be thy experience, for the true chaste spouse of Christ mourns like a dove without her mate, when he has left her. Ask, then, the question, what has driven Christ from you? He hides his face behind the wall of your sins. That wall may be built up of little pebbles, as easily as of great stones. The sea is made of drops, the rocks are made of grains; and ah! surely the sea which divides thee from Christ may be filled with the drops of thy little sins; and the rock which is to wreck thy barque, may have been made by daily working of the coral insects of thy little sins. Therefore, take heed thereunto; for if thou wouldst live with Christ, and walk with Christ, and see Christ, and have fellowship with Christ, take heed, I pray thee, of the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.

And now, leaving the child of God thus awhile, I turn myself to address others of you who have some thought with regard to your souls, but who could not yet be ranked among those that fear God with a true heart. To you, I know, Satan often offers this temptation—“Is it not a little one?” May God help you to answer him whenever he thus attacks you. “Is it not a little one?” And so, young man, the devil has tempted thee to commit the first petty

theft. "Is it not a little one?" And so he has bidden thee, young man, for the first time in thy life to spend the day of rest in foolish pleasure. It was but a little one, he said, and thou hast taken him at his word, and thou hast committed it. It was but a little one, and so you have told a lie. It was but a little one, and you have gone into the assembly of the frivolous and mixed in the society of scorers. It was but a little one, there could not be much hurt in it, it could not do much mischief to your soul. Ah! stop awhile. Dost thou know that a little sin, if wantonly indulged, will prevent thy salvation? "The foundation of God standeth sure having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his, and let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." Christ will reveal salvation from all his sins to the man who hates all his sins; but if thou keepest one sin to thyself, thou shalt never have mercy at his hands. If thou wilt forsake all thy ways, and turn with full purpose of heart to Christ, the biggest sin thou hast ever committed shall not destroy thy soul; but if a little sin be harboured, thy prayers will be unheard, thy sighs disregarded, and thy earnest cries shall return into thy bosom without a blessing. You have been in prayer lately, you have been seeking Christ, you have been praying with all your might that God would meet with you. Now months have rolled over your head, you are not yet saved, not yet have you received the comfortable assurance of your pardon. Young man, is it not likely that some little known sin is still harboured in your heart? Mark, then, God will never be at one with thee till thou and thy sins are twain. Part with thy sins, or else part with all hope, though thou hide but so much as a grain of sin back from God. He will not, he cannot have any mercy on thee. Come to him just as thou art, but renounce thy sins. Ask him to set thee free from every lust, from every false way, from every evil thing, or else, mark thee, thou shalt never find grace and favour at his hands. The greatest sin in the world, repented of, shall be forgiven, but the least unrepented sin shall sink thy soul lower than the lowest hell. Mark then, again, sinner, thou who indulgest in little sins sometimes. These little sins show that thou art yet in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Rowland Hill tells a curious tale of one of his hearers who sometimes visited the theatre. He was a member of the church. So going to see him, he said, I understand Mr. So-and-so, you are very fond of frequenting the theatre. No, sir, he said, that's false. I go now and then just for a great treat, still I don't go because I like it; it is not a habit of mine. Well, said Rowland Hill, suppose some one should say to me, Mr. Hill, I understand you eat carrion, and I should say, no, no, I don't eat carrion. It is true, I now and then have a piece of stinking carrion for a great treat. Why, he would say, you have convicted yourself, it shows that you like it better than most people, because you save it up for a special treat. Other men only take it as common daily food, but you keep it by way of a treat. It shows the deceitfulness of your heart, and manifests that you still love the ways and wages of sin.

Ah, my friends, those men that say little sins have no vice in them whatever, they do but give indications of their own character; they show which way the stream runs. A straw

may let you know which way the wind blows, or even a floating feather; and so may some little sin be an indication of the prevailing tendency of the heart. My hearer, if thou lovest sin, though it be but a little one, thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Thou art still a stranger to divine grace. The wrath of God abideth on thee. Thou art a lost soul unless God change thy heart.

And yet, another remark here. Sinner, thou sayest it is but a little one. But dost thou know that God will damn thee for thy little sins? Look angry now, and say the minister is harsh. But wilt thou look angry at thy God in the day when he shalt condemn thee for ever? If there were a good man in a prison to-day and you did not go to see him, would you think that a great sin? Certainly not, you say, I should not think of doing such a thing. If you saw a man hungry and you did not feed him, would you think that a great sin? No, you say, I should not. Nevertheless, these are the very things for which men are sent to hell. What said the Judge? "I was hungry and ye gave me no meat, thirsty and ye gave me no drink, I was sick and in prison and ye visited me not. Forasmuch as ye have not done this unto the least of these, my brethren, ye have not done it unto me." Now, if these things, which we only consider to be little sins, actually send myriads to hell, ought we not to stop and tremble ere we talk lightly of sin, since little sins may be our eternal destroyers. Ah, man, the pit of hell is digged for little sins. An eternity of woe is prepared for what men call little sins. It is not alone the murderer, the drunkard, the whoremonger, that shall be sent to hell. The wicked, it is true, shall be sent there, but the little sinner with all the nations that forget God shall have his portion there also. Tremble, therefore, on account of little sins.

When I was a little lad, I one day read at family prayer the chapter in the Revelations concerning the "bottomless pit." Stopping in the midst of it, I said to my grandfather, "Grandfather, what does this mean—the bottomless pit?" He said, "Go on child, go on." So I read that chapter, but I took great care to read it the next morning also. Stopping again I said, "Bottomless pit, what does this mean?" "Go on," he said, "Go on." Well it came the next morning, and so on for a fortnight; there was nothing to be read by me of a morning but this same chapter, for explained it should be if I read it a month. And I can remember the horror of my mind when he told me what the idea was. There is a deep pit, and the soul is falling down,—oh how fast it is falling! There! the last ray of light at the top has disappeared, and it falls on—on—on, and so it goes on falling—on—on—on—for a thousand years! "Is it not getting near the bottom yet? won't it stop?" No, no—the cry is, on—on—on, "I have been falling a million years, is it not near the bottom yet?" No, you are no nearer the bottom yet: it is the "bottomless pit;" it is on—on—on, and so the soul goes on falling, perpetually, into a deeper depth still, falling for ever into the "bottomless pit"—on —on—on, into the pit that has no bottom! Woe without termination, without hope of it's coming to a conclusion. The same dreadful idea is contained in those words, "The wrath to come." Mark, hell is always "the wrath to come." If a man has been in hell a thousand years, it is still "to come." As to

what you have suffered in the past it is as nothing, in the dread account, for still the wrath is “to come.” And when the world has grown grey with age, and the fires of the sun are quenched in darkness, it is still “the wrath to come.” And when other worlds have sprung up, and have turned into their palsied age, it is still “the wrath to come.” And when your soul, burnt through and through with anguish, sighs at last to be annihilated, even then this awful thunder shall be heard, “the wrath to come—to come—to come.” Oh, what an idea! I know not how to utter it! And yet for little sins, remember you incur “the wrath to come.” Oh, if I am to be damned, I would be damned for something; but to be delivered up to the executioner and sent into “the wrath to come” for little sins which do not even make me famous as a rebel, this is to be damned indeed. Oh that ye would arise, that ye would flee from the wrath to come, that ye would forsake the little sins, and fly to the great cross of Christ to have little sins blotted out, and little offences washed away. For oh,—again I warn you,—if ye die with little sins unforgiven, with little sins unrepented of, there shall be no little hell; the great wrath of the great king is ever to come, in a pit without a bottom, in a hell the fire of which never shall be quenched, and the worm of which ne’er shall die. Oh, “the wrath to come! the wrath to come!” It is enough to make one’s heart ache to think of it. God help you to flee from it. May you escape from it now, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.