



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Ephesians 4: 17-24

Winter 2023-24

"Passing Through Vanity Fair"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning to all of you. We are in Ephesians chapter 4, verses 17-24, this morning. It's a very critical, crucial passage in understanding the spiritual life, which is reflected in other texts as well that we will briefly examine in our lesson. We're looking into verses 17-24, but I first want to read verse 1 of chapter 4, because it contrasts with the beginning of our passage. So I will read verse 1, and then go to verse 17.

4 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called;

Ephesians 4:1

Now verse 17,

¹⁷ So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, ¹⁸ being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; ¹⁹ and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. ²⁰ But you did not learn Christ in this way, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, ²² that, in reference to your former

manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, ²³ and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴ and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Ephesians 4: 17-24

Now, those exhortations there, as I will point out in our lesson, are a reminder of what they were told to do when they first heard the Gospel. This is not how we live the Christian life every day, 'putting off the old man', but we'll come to that in the lesson itself.

So let's bow in a word of prayer and ask the LORD to bless our time together.

LORD, we do seek Your blessing upon us. What a great opportunity this is for all of us to be together on this Sunday, kind of a messy day but it's the day that You've made. And we thank You for the rain, and we thank You for the weather, and pray You'd give us all safety leaving today and driving on these roads; and those who are traveling, and we think of Mike as he's on his way back to Oklahoma, give him a safe drive. We are in Your hand and so we have every reason to rejoice for You're in control.

You reign!, as we just sang. Regardless of what's going on in the world, You're on Your throne, reigning. And that reign, that rule, doesn't touch just the great movements of history, it's every detail of life, and so we're secure in Your hand and we pray Your rich blessing upon us in this hour; spiritually and then materially as well, LORD, and that You would give us safety. But we also think of those who are sick and not able to join us; we pray for them. LORD, You know them, and You know their needs, and I pray that You'd take care of all who may be listening, who are not with us, and bless them.

And bless us now, as we continue with the service, as we sing our next hymn, and as we consider the meaning of this great text—and then, may You apply it to us and urge

us, as Paul urged those Ephesians, 'to live according to the worthiness of their calling and not according to the conduct of the Gentiles.'

We look to You to bless. We thank You for Christ, and all we have in Him; and it's in His name we pray. Amen.

(Message) We, as Christians, are pilgrims in this world. We're passing through on our way to heaven. But it is not an easy 'passing through'. In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and his friend Faithful were told that, 'the way to the heavenly Jerusalem went through Vanity Fair. There was no escaping it.'

It was an ancient fair, described as 'a lusty fair.' All kinds of things are sold there; houses, lands, honors, titles, pleasures, and delights of all sorts. But they all had one thing in common—vanity. They are all *vanity*.

When Christian and Faithful were passing through, they were noticed immediately; there was, "a great gazing upon them", Bunyan wrote. They were different. Their clothes were different, so different that people thought they were fools. Their speech was different; they spoke a different language, 'the language of Canaan'; they sounded like Barbarians. And most galling of all, they were not amused by the merchants or interested in their wares. They didn't buy anything and barely looked at what was sold. —They were 'passing through'.

Alas, many Christians today show a lot more interest in the wares of the world than those two pilgrims did—and it was the same in Paul's day. The city of Ephesus was 'the Vanity Fair' of that day. It was a great city of wealth and pleasure, a life the saints had been called out of. But the city kept calling back to them—and it was alluring; the world is alluring.

So Paul tells them, "Walk no longer as the Gentiles walk." (vs17). He reminded them that they were completely different from this world; 'We are a new creation. We are dressed differently. We have put off the old life and we've put on the new self. So, live like it.' That, in brief, is the lesson of our text, Ephesians chapter 4, verses 17-24.

Chapter 4, as you know, begins the *ethical section* of the book. In chapters 1-3, Paul gave doctrine. Now, based on that doctrine, Paul makes the application; he gives instruction on how to live. It began in verse 1 where Paul urged—pleaded with them, "...to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called..." It is a holly calling.

He now reconnects with that in verse 17 with a contrast, showing them what is not a worthy walk or manner of life. It's what they were 'saved out of,' and what they were not to 'fall back into'. He was concerned for them. The pull of the world, as I said, is strong, and Paul wrote to them with a sense of urgency. "So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind," (vs17).

Vanity of vanities; that's the life of the Gentiles. "Futility", emptiness...that's the idea here—though it didn't seem to be so. As you think about it, it doesn't seem to be so, for the Greeks were, 'the great thinkers' and the Romans, 'the great builders'. But Paul told the Corinthians that the Gentiles thought the Gospel of a crucified Christ was "foolishness", (1Cor 1:23), and as so many today also think. Nevertheless, Paul was saying, 'They are the fools.' They build their kingdoms by blood and iron and their philosophies by human reason—but it all comes to nothing. Their kingdoms don't last, and their philosophies don't attain to wisdom and God. It is all vanity; it is futility.

And Paul gives the reason for that failure in verse 18: It's *darkness*. Their "understanding", their reasoning process is "darkened." Now Paul wasn't saying Socrates was stupid. Greek thinkers had powerful minds. In fact, it's been said that all philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Then today, scientists and engineers understand math and have done amazing things—building roads, and bridges, and skyscrapers, and launching men into space.

And writers and thinkers have shown keen insight into human nature; Shakespeare is a good example of that. They understand human nature, they can see the

problem—but they don't have the answer to the human problem. They're lost, and without a compass. (Now you can be without a compass...and know that you're lost—but you can't find your way to your destination without one.) And likewise, they cannot arrive at the truth of God and eternal verity.

And the reason is given here. They are “darkened in their understanding”, (vs18), so that their notions about God and the way out of our predicament are always wrong—Always! When people don't begin with revelation but begin with human reason, they will never arrive at the truth. Where we begin determines where we will end.

Let me illustrate. When you learned to type, the first thing you were taught was where to place your fingers on the keyboard. If the small finger of the right hand is one key over, just one key off, everything will be off. A person can be a skilled typist, can read the text and type fast and furiously—but if the fingers of one hand are one key off, what is typed will be complete nonsense. Where you begin determines where you will end.

And the same is true in spiritual matters. David understood that. He wrote in Psalm 36, verse 9, "For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light." If a person begins without the light of God, without God's revelation and truth, then he or she will be in the dark and will inevitably reason and walk in the wrong direction—and come to the wrong place.

It all goes back to Genesis chapter 3, and the fall of man. Sin has so infected all mankind, all our faculties—our mind, and will, our emotions, our physical body...it's affected it *completely*. We talk about ‘total depravity’, (it's a term that we discussed, I think, back at the beginning of chapter 2), that is so often misunderstood. It doesn't mean, ‘We are monsters and we're as bad as we can be’; it means we've been totally affected by sin—and it's affected the mind.

If that revelation, (and I would say not just the revelation in Genesis 3, but Genesis chapters 1 through 3), is not understood, and is rejected, then people are ‘lost at sea’—they don't understand their problem, so they certainly won't understand the solution.

And this is the case; mankind does not believe Genesis 1 through 3—does not believe chapter 3: That man is *fallen*. People, (the Gentiles here), are “darkened in their understanding”. As a result, Paul wrote, “They are excluded from the life of God...” (vs 18b). Alienated. They are not in some neutral place. They are separated from God's life; “dead” is the word that Paul used in chapter 2, verse 1.

God lives in His people. We've been regenerated by His grace; we've been ‘sealed by the Holy Spirit’; and Paul says that, for a second time, later in this chapter in verse 30.

But the Gentiles, the pagans here, unbelievers, have none of that; so they haven't the ability to understand. Their minds are not animated by God's life, and they are without God's Spirit to guide them and direct them in their thinking and in their willing, (their decisions). And that's no reason for gloating on our part—all of that is given by God Almighty. We are debtors to mercy alone; it's due to His sovereign grace alone. Still, the Gentiles were responsible; they are guilty of their separation. Paul states that next: This separation is due to their, “ignorance”, which is, “because of the hardness of their heart.” (18c). Now it's true that they didn't have the Scriptures, as Israel did—(didn't have the Bible). They didn't have what we call ‘*special* revelation’—but they did had ‘*general* revelation’. We sang about this in that hymn, *This Is My Father's World*; the hymn writer could hear God speaking through the breeze rustling through the grass.

This revelation is all around. It is all around us in nature; it's above us in the universe. The psalmist wrote of that, you know, Psalm 19, verse 1, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God...” —and it is clear from that, that there is a Creator. It's unmistakably clear that this didn't just happen—there is a Creator.

But men invariably rejected that most basic revelation in nature. Romans chapter 1, verse 18, is Paul's commentary on Psalm 19, verse 1: ‘In unrighteousness men suppress the truth revealed from heaven.’ (Rom 1:18). Instead of, ‘worshiping the Creator they worship the creature. They worship man, they worship the creeping things’, he says. (ibid, vs25).

So, man is ignorant of the true God. And Paul traced that to willful unbelief; it's "because of the hardness of their heart." (vs18c). Now there's a logical pattern to this devolution: It begins with hardness of heart—willful unbelief that leads to ignorance; and the consequence of that is separation from God and darkness of mind. So because of their rejection of God's revelation, their minds are darkened and they will never, (by the natural process of thought, by human reason), never come to a knowledge of the truth.

And that in turn, has consequences in their behavior; "...they having become callous...", Paul said in verse 19, —insensitive to right and wrong, and as a result, "...have given themselves over to sensuality..." Now that's what Solomon wrote in Proverbs 23, verse 7. "For as he thinks within himself, so he is." The consequence of Gentile unbelief—"...they...gave themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness." (vs19b). It's full blown hedonism. Even when they had a sense of right and wrong they didn't have the self-control over their passions to stop themselves and to do the right thing. The Roman poet, Ovid, a generation before Paul wrote, "I see the better and approve it, but I do not cease to follow the worst."

Now not all were as bad as they could be. Not all are as bad as they can be today. Paul was describing Gentile life, pagan life in general. Some were more moral than others, but all were separated from God and the life of God.

And that is what these Ephesians were called 'out of'; saved from corruption, self-destruction, just as the Corinthians were, where Paul reminded them of their former manner of life in 1 Corinthians 6, verses 9-11; "...Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards...will inherit the kingdom of God. Such," Paul said, "were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God."

Notice, "Such were some of you..." (1Cor 6:11). 'You were a thief...but that was the past; you are no longer. Don't think of yourself as being that. There's no such thing as a Christian thief. You're a new creation, therefore live it!'

And that is Paul's lesson here for the Ephesians: 'You were pagans'; you "...practice every kind impurity with greediness", and 'living a selfish, self-centered life.' (vs19). "But," he wrote, "you did not learn Christ in this way..." (vs20). 'You were called out of all of that.' In other words, 'When you learned Christ, you learned a completely opposite way from all of that.'

But now, that is an unusual way of putting it, isn't it? Paul didn't write, 'You learned a doctrine of Christ', or, 'some facts about Christ'; but, 'You learned Christ.' In other words, 'They came to know Him personally.' Of course, they learned the doctrines of His deity and humanity—that He is the God-man; He's the second Person of the Trinity. (They didn't use the word 'Trinity' then, rather 'Godhead'.) But they learned the basic doctrinal truths of the Lord: About His incarnation, His death, and His resurrection. And you will never know Christ personally if you don't know *about* Christ. It's fundamental that we have the doctrines of the faith—we must know them.

But in *knowing* them, we must *believe* them. And in believing them, (as they did), they 'learned Christ'. And through faith, they came to know Him personally because we have a living Savior. And when we believe in Him, when we join ourselves to Him through faith, He comes to us, and He lives in us through the Holy Spirit. We experience His life in us. And He Himself teaches us, and teaches us a way very different from the way of the world.

Paul reminded them of that and the personal nature of it in verse 21 by saying, "If indeed you have heard Him." (Now, I don't think he means, 'I question that you did.' (*hear Him*)). Rather it's a way of saying, 'If indeed, (and I think you did)'. So, it could be translated, 'In as much as you heard Him...', and Paul was convinced that they had. For he had witnessed the amazing revival in Ephesus—in the whole area, the region around that's recorded in Acts chapter 19, a great revival! And then the dramatic change that

occurred in the people; they gave up their practices of magic and the occult, and all of the practices that they had engaged in. —And a great deal is made of that in chapter 19 of Acts.

But again, Paul used very personal terms to describe what had happened to them and their relationship, their connection to the Lord Jesus Christ. 'They heard Him', he said. When did they hear Him? How did they hear Him? Not audibly like Paul did on the Damascus road, (at least there's no record of that in Ephesus). They "heard Him" through the Gospel preached; and they "heard Him" through the teaching of God's Word.

And we too, hear Christ speak to us through the reading of Scripture and through the study of the Word of God. He personally communicates with us through the Bible and the teaching of it.

And Paul added to that, "...truth is in Jesus..." (vs21b). So, what we learn from Jesus is truth; what we learn from Him is reliable. And wouldn't it be? —He's the Son of God, the eternal Son of God.

Well, this is not teaching that leads to futility—just the opposite. And in the final verses, verse 22-24, Paul states what they were taught—and he summarizes it in three words, (at least in the original text, the Greek text, it's three words—we have it here, more in phrases), but in the word, '*laying aside*', in the word, '*renewing*', and the word, '*putting on*'. So, the gist of his instruction here can be simplified with verse 22 saying, "lay aside the old self", and verse 24 saying, "put on the new self." —So two simple commands.

Now, it's important as I indicated in the reading of the text, to understand that this is the instructions that they originally heard, when Paul gave them the Gospel. He had told them to 'be born again', to 'lay aside the old self', and 'put on the new self'. And if indeed, they had 'heard Christ' at that time and believed in Him, then they had done that; they'd done that very thing...and Paul reminds them of that here.

So this is not instruction on how to live the Christian life—as though we are to be continually, daily, ‘putting off the old self and putting on the new self’. We have done that. Believers are born again; we are a new creation. You're born again *once*; you become a new creation *permanently*.

We see that clearly taught in a similar passage, (a passage that is, really, parallel to this one in Ephesians), in the Book of Colossians; Colossians chapter 3, verses 9-10. And there Paul wrote, "Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self...", (*see, that's in the past tense*), "...since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created Him." It is because the Colossians had *already* put off their old self, (when they were born again and converted), and put on the new self that they could be told to, ‘Stop practicing the old life—it makes no sense. You're not that person any more!’

Well the same logic is here in Ephesians 4. What they were originally taught when they ‘heard Christ’ in the Gospel message, (that Paul preached), was, ‘Be born again; put off the old self; put on the new self.’ They heard Christ in that message—and they obeyed. And as a result, they were now new creatures in Christ. So they were to, ‘lay aside the old practices’, (like speaking falsehoods), and instead, they were to, ‘speak truth.’ “Truth is in Christ.” (vs21b). So, those who are in Christ, who are a new creation in Christ, speak truth.

Well that's the typical pattern of Paul's instructions: He gave exhortations and commands based on what we now are. We have an example of that, (and really, of everything Paul is teaching here), in Romans chapter 6. In verse 6 he wrote, "...knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Christ*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with...". We were crucified with Him—and that's a definitive thing.

Then, in verse 12 he wrote, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts..." In other words, ‘Because the old self was crucified and is

dead, don't live that old life. You're dead to it!' That's what Paul told the Colossians, and that's what he was here telling the Ephesians.

The instruction given in Romans 6, verse 11, is the first command given in the Book of Romans. Romans 6, verse 11...after six and 1/2 chapters of doctrine...and then he comes to an exhortation, where he wrote, "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." In other words, 'You Romans were once alive to sin. It ruled you; it controlled your life. —But no longer! You died to it. You are a new creature so don't give in to sin. There's no going back to that old life—you've died to that!'

He's telling the Ephesians the same thing: 'They once walked as the Gentiles walked. They became callous and had given themselves over to sensuality and every kind of impurity.' (vs19). In other words, 'There was a time when they were ruled by their passions and sins, but no longer. Then they had put off the old life, they put on the new one, the new self. They were new creatures.'

Now that doesn't mean that they didn't struggle. Obviously, they did; verse 17 is an exhortation to, 'not go after the way of the Gentiles from which they'd been delivered.' No, there is always going to be a struggle with sin. The old life is all around us, calling to us, inviting us to participate in the pleasures of *Vanity Fair*. We always will struggle with that. That's the reason Paul urged the Ephesians to, "...walk no longer as the Gentiles also walk..." (vs17).

But the first step in following Christ's teaching is to understand who we are, and what has happened to us. We took off the ragged, filthy garments of the old life and put on the new, clean garment of the new life. We severed ties with the old life—and we made a new connection to Christ.

And the attention Paul just gave to that old life, (in which he developed the whole process of their thinking and where they were, the 'darkness' of it, the 'sensuality' of it), all of that was intended to remind them of what they had been *saved out of*. And now into the blessings of their new life: this new, clean life—this life of being justified

and accepted by God...What a great blessing! —And a great blessing that we have been delivered from that old life.

Charles Dickens invented some interesting characters for his novels. One of the strangest is Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. (Now, I'm not a great fan of the book. I had to read it in high school—and then again in college.) —But she is interesting.

In the book she's an old woman who had been stood up on her wedding day. It so deeply affected her that from that moment on, life stopped—she lived in that moment. Everything in the house remained as it was on that day, years earlier. The clocks were all stopped on the same hour; her shrunken body was still clothed in her faded wedding dress; the wedding cake was still in the parlor, covered with cobwebs...everything was. There she lived—out of the light, among the mice and the dust, in a kind of death.

Now it's fiction. It's hard to imagine that—but 'the way of the Gentiles' that Paul described here, is no less insane—and it is fact! Why would anyone want to go back to that house who's been delivered from it?! Why would anyone want to go back to the darkness and the dust and the death of that dreary house—to the old life, the failed life of sin and sadness?! Well?...Why is it?

Because...it's attractive to us. But what a foolish thing to be attracted to. Nevertheless it calls, it beckons, it invites us to come back and live in the dust and the death of it, for it does appeal to us.

Our defense against that is first to realize what that kind of life really is; it's an illusion. And then realize what we really are: a new creation, dressed in the clean clothes of righteousness, living in the Light, with a Savior who never leaves us, never forsakes us. And in spite of the strong illusion of the world, and the lie that it gives, and that is so appealing to us—in spite of all of that, we can resist and, "walk in a manner worthy of the calling", (Eph 4:1), because, as Paul wrote in verse 23, 'We are being renewed in the spirit of our mind.'

Well, that is sanctification, which is the work of God's free grace by which the Holy Spirit renews our mind and will, and enables us to increasingly die to sin—and live to righteousness. [That's basically the definition that is given in The Shorter Catechism, a great, great statement of faith for the Christian to study and understand—and The Larger Catechism as well.] But that work of sanctification is constant. It's an ongoing process in which our attitudes and desires are changed, our minds are enlightened, and our wills are strengthened in the resolve to do God's will. And all of that makes us more and more like Christ.

Paul wrote of this in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 18, that, 'as we behold, as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord', (that is, as we behold Christ in the Scriptures, see Him in the Scriptures), we, "...are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." That's the process of sanctification—we're going "from glory to glory."

As we read the Bible, and as we reflect upon what we read, as we reflect upon the Lord—upon His person, His work, His grace and goodness, the Holy Spirit transforms us into what we are seeing; into what we're thinking about. It's God's work. It's His sovereign work that only He can do.

Still, we are responsible to act. Paul indicated that later in the Book of Romans, in chapter 12, verse 2, where he instructed them to, "...be transformed by the renewing of you mind..." The *means* that the Spirit uses to transform us is the Word of God—and we're responsible to be students of it. I sound like a broken record because I say that all the time, but it's essential that we do that. There's no transformation of the soul apart from Scripture; so read it, hear it, study it.

That's where Christ speaks to us and how the Holy Spirit transforms us. He's constantly working within us. He can't be frustrated, and He will finish His work in us. That's the promise that He gives: Philippians chapter 1, verse 6, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it...", (*will complete it*), "...until the day of Christ Jesus." He will never forsake us.

And one thing the Spirit does in sanctification is impress on us our identity. It is essential for the Christian life that we know who we are: That we are a new creation on a new and different path. We are to recognize that to be true; we are to recognize it to be so. That's fundamental to developing as a Christian.

Again, that was Paul's instruction in Romans chapter 6, verse 11, the first command in the Book of Romans, "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." *Consider* it; *Know* it; *Reckon* it to be true! We are not the people we once were—therefore we cannot live as we once lived.

I know I told this story before, probably more than once, but I can't think of a better example of what I'm saying here than the one that Augustin gave from his own life.

As a young man he lived in unbelief and he lived in immorality. In his confessions, he recounts a prayer that he prayed. It's one of the most famous prayers in that book; he prayed, "Give me chastity and self-restraint, but not yet."

Then a few chapters later is his famous conversion in a garden—and he was changed. He became a very different man, though a man still faced with temptations to fall back into the old life.

One day, his past caught up with him when he was approached on the street by his former mistress. When he saw her he turned and he walked the other way. Surprised, the woman called out, "Augustin, it is I!" Augustin kept walking the other way and answered, "Yes, but it is not I!"

True—he was, 'a new creation; the old things had passed away;...new things had come.' (2Co 5:17). That's how we live; that's how we grow as Christians. That's how we advance in our character and Christ likeness—by realizing we are no longer the people we once were, realizing we're no longer citizens of this world. (Now, we have responsibilities in this world because, in one sense, we are citizens of this city and this

country—and we must obey the laws; that's what Paul would counsel...did counsel in Romans 13.) But we're not *spiritually* connected to this world.

We're different people; we're 'pilgrims, passing through'. As Evangelist told Christian and Faithful, "The way to the heavenly Jerusalem is through Vanity Fair. We would have to go out of the world to avoid it." So the two pilgrims, dressed in the clean clothes of righteousness entered the Fair and refused to conform. As a result they were both arrested, and Faithful was made to die for his faith. But he did not die in vain; we never do. One man, Hopeful, was moved by his witness, joined Christian, and together they traveled on to heavenly glory.

That's to be us in this world—being a faithful, living witness to the grace of God in salvation. And our witness to the world, to any hearer who may not have believed in Jesus Christ is, 'Be born again! Put off the old self. Put on the new. Believe in Christ, the Son of God, and Savior of the lost. Trust in Him. Rest in Him. If you hear Him, if you hear Christ, believe! Become a new creation—forgiven and received into God's family!'

May God help you to do that.

And help all of us to reckon it to be true that we're new creatures in Christ—and live according to that.

(Closing prayer) Father, what a great thing to know that You welcome the weakest and the vilest of the poor. That's Your mercy, and it's more, much more than our sins—it covers them all. And because of that, everyone who trusts in You is justified at that moment and forever. And we're being sanctified; we're a new creation accepted by You. Impress that deeply upon our minds and our thinking—who we are, that we would live according to it, and not conform to this world.

We thank You for Your grace and Your mercy.

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Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

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