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More Precious Than Silver

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To Those Who Are Meeting Joni for the First Time

These days it's not uncommon to encounter disabled people who are successfully imprinting their gifts and abilities on society. But when the disabled person has authored more than twenty-two books, many of them best-sellers, when that individual is an internationally known advocate and artist, we do a double take.

Joni Eareckson Tada, as a result of a diving accident, has lived in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the shoulders down, for over thirty years. In a quest to better understand the goodness of God in the midst of suffering, she has invested most of these years in a probing and personal study of God's Word. What has resulted from her latest studies is *More Precious Than Silver*.

Of this book she writes, "Nothing beats the rigorous yet simple discipline of spending a little formal time with God and his Word every day. And nothing kick-starts a daily quiet time better than a devotional book that reads easily and runs deep. That's why I've pulled together these devotionals. These pieces of silver include insights that, over three decades in a wheelchair, have made me rich in faith and wealthy in hope."

Joni has been presented scores of awards and honors, including two honorary doctorate degrees from Gordon College and Columbia International University. When asked about her involvements, Joni most often refers to her work at JAF Ministries, including Wheels for the World—a program through which used wheelchairs are collected, refurbished, and hand-delivered, along with Bibles, to needy disabled people in developing nations. Chuck Colson has stated, "My friend Joni Eareckson Tada is one of God's choice servants of today." Philip Yancey has added, "Through her public example, Joni has done more to straighten out warped views of suffering than all the theologians put together. Her life is a triumph of healing—a healing of the spirit, the most difficult kind." You can read more about this remarkable woman in the twentieth-anniversary edition of her autobiography, titled *Joni*, published by Zondervan.

Before You Begin

To the right of my bedroom mirror, hanging from a brass hook, is a necklace that holds a delicate little cross. It's one of my most precious pieces of jewelry. It's the only cross I own and it's made of silver.

I prefer things silver. That's unusual, for silver often takes a backseat to its richer brother, gold. We think of gold as warm, but silver, cool. Gold seems soft, but silver, hard. First-place medals are made of gold, not its second cousin, silver. Most people seem to prefer things golden. We even speak "words that are golden."

But when God speaks, it's *silver*. Psalm 12:6 says, "The words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace . . . purified seven times." Purity and silver go together best when it comes to describing God's Word. Why does God choose this precious metal? Perhaps it's because gold requires impurities so it can bond. But not silver. God is less interested in attractiveness and more interested in purity.

Dentists understand this—one unusual quality of silver that accentuates its purity is its ability to kill bacteria that comes in contact with it. So too the Word of God is not only pure, it has the ability, when applied by faith, to cleanse the reader of his or her sin. God is not as concerned about people finding his words "golden," all beautiful and attractive, as he is about people's lives being touched by the "silver" of his Word—becoming changed, holy, and pure.

I thought of this as I wrote *More Precious Than Silver*. It's a silver mine, and I'm grateful to a few good friends who have helped me select, polish, and present some exceptional and precious pieces. I thank Steve Jensen, who dug into his personal treasure trove and handcrafted thirty devotionals for me to use. I'm indebted to Steve Estes, whose ideas I occasionally borrowed from his chapters in the book we wrote together, *When God Weeps*. Ted Neale, our interim pastor at Church in the Canyon, also scattered silver my way in several of his sermons. Finally, I'm thankful to several key writers and thinkers whose ideas served as the springboard for my own—I have credited these contributors in parentheses at the close of certain paragraphs.

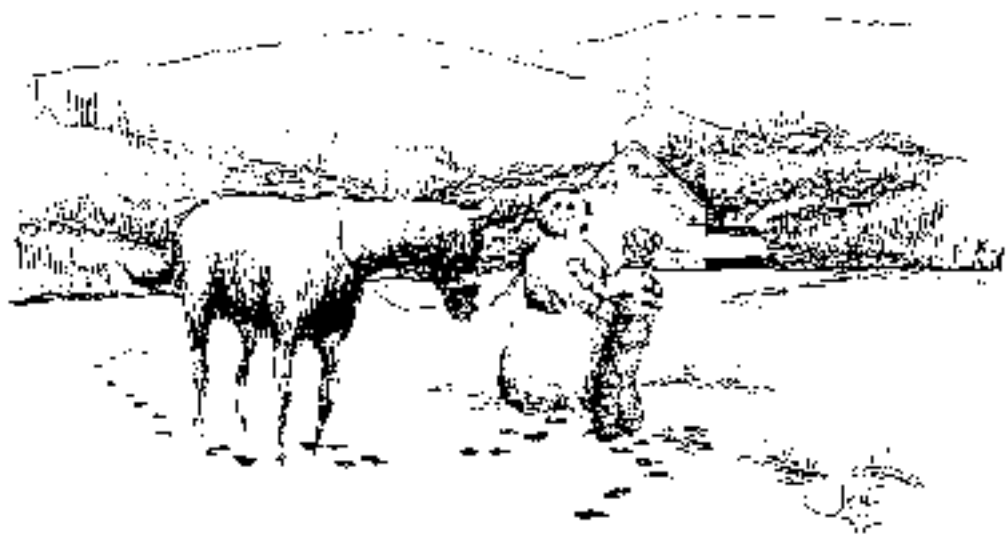
Having mined the ideas, I am grateful to dear friends who helped "set" the silver in this book, showcasing it like custom-designed jewelry. To Scott

Bolinder, John Sloan, and Bob Hudson at Zondervan. To Robert Wolgemuth at *Wolgemuth & Associates*. To Angela Hoogland, who gave me her Saturdays, and Francie Lorey and Judy Butler, who gave me their weekdays. I'm especially thankful to Janet Grant, who, in lending me her writing skills, helped to craft a large portion of my manuscript. My deepest appreciation goes to my husband, Ken, who cheers me on from the sidelines.

You hold in your hands a book that reads like silver, cool and fast. And like the shiny metal, you'll find the reading pure and deep. From the start of each day's vignette, you'll be brought into as close a contact as possible with the awesome truth of the Word of God. You'll have a chance to feel the smooth surface of each Scripture verse and discover the firm, solid reality beneath it. Have fun "wearing" a new piece of silver each day. And remember, when you come in touch with silver, refined and pure, your heart can't help but be changed.

—JONI EARECKSON TADA
SUMMER 1998

JANUARY



January 1

The Lord Out Ahead

By day the LORD went ahead of them.

—Exodus 13:21

I like the idea of a new year. It's a turning point where you say good-bye to the past and get charged up about the future.

True, I could be weighed down thinking of last year's trip-ups, those embarrassing things that still nag. I had a bad disagreement with Ken a couple of months ago; I disappointed a dear friend earlier in the summer; I spoke at an event back east and my message fell flat. No prayer behind it, no real preparation, I realized later. And there was that tough business decision that caused a lot of tension between Ken, me, and a family in our church. If I had to do it all over again, I'd change a lot.

You probably have your own list of things you wish you could change. If we thought about it long enough, we could become so heavyhearted that we wouldn't want to face the future. But thankfully, God is the God of all those past months. He was as much in control then as he is now.

What a relief! Because you'd better believe that the coming months will have the same sort of blunders, mistakes, and embarrassing *faux pas*. But wait . . .

God has gone before you! He's already there, up front, out ahead. And he will guard you with his grace and help you learn from past mistakes. For certain this year I'll be more careful in my relationship with my husband. I'll give business decisions more thought. And needless to say, I'm fully committed to being prepared and prayed up for every speaking engagement.

Before this year gets going, reflect upon last year. Page through your calendar and pray over those places, people, and decisions from which you can learn. Take inventory, then roll up your sleeves and get started. Hurray, the Lord has gone before you!

What comfort, Lord, to know that as I turn the corner into this new year, you have gone before me. You have carved out a path for me and covered it in your protection.

January 2

Repentance and the Rose Bowl

Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

—Psalm 51:14

One New Year's Day while Ken and I and a friend of ours were watching a football game on television, we heard a horrible crash outside, followed by the sound of a car zooming away. As we rushed out the door, we found part of our lawn torn up by tire tracks, our mailbox smashed, and our friend's Mustang mangled.

A few minutes later we heard a gentle rap on our front door. Two boys about twelve years old were standing there. Red-faced and quivering, they were too frightened to speak. I asked, "Did one of you drive the vehicle that crashed into my friend's car?"

"Yes, ma'am," the slightly taller boy answered.

As the boys told us their story, I was grateful for guilt, that heavy weight on our consciences when we've done something wrong. The more we respond to guilt, the more sensitive we become to wrongdoing. For the two boys, confessing was important in keeping their consciences sensitive. A clear conscience, according to Bill Gothard, "is that inner freedom of spirit and assurance from knowing that you have a transparency toward everyone; and that no one is able to accuse you of wrongs that you have never made 'right.'"¹

Turns out that while the "driver's" parents were attending a game at the Rose Bowl—the game we were watching on TV—the boy invited his friend for a joyride in his dad's Mercedes. Ultimately the insurance company paid for repairs, the boys were grounded, and we had a chance to witness to a neighbor. Best of all, the consciences of those two boys had become softened. That's how that story ended.

If guilt is crushing your conscience, how will your story end? Will you speed away? Or will you go back to confess to God? Acts 24:16 describes the Christian: "I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."

Thank you, Father, that you have equipped us with a warning device in our hearts that alerts us when we need to confess a deed or word.

January 3

God's Autobiography

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with
God, and the Word was God.

—John 1:1

Novelist Robertson Davies once wrote, “To ask an author . . . if his work is autobiographical is like asking a spider where he buys his thread.”² No author ever weaves words from someone else’s being. They are always his words, reflecting his soul.

The Bible reveals God’s soul to us in a way that no other book is able to do. It is history, wisdom, and poetry. It is unparalleled as a compendium of theology, philosophy, and ethics. It is a gospel tract, distilling the essence of our relationship to the Lord, but it is also an epic, introducing us to the immensity of an eternal God.

Though the Bible contains all these things, it is at its heart an autobiography. The Bible is all about God. Through even the most twisted and unlikely narratives, some even tawdry, we see God’s soul reflected to us. God is revealed as Jacob wrestles with him. God is showcased through the complaint of Job, the anguish of Jeremiah, and the courage of Hannah. God is the voice behind the people’s shouting and singing over the new temple of Solomon; he is the echo behind the weeping over the rebuilt temple of Ezra. God is the silence of the four centuries before Christ, and the exultant glory in the night sky of Bethlehem.

Every word speaks something to us of his soul. It is not just from the prophets’ mouths that we hear his lament over Israel. We hear it in the very telling of the captivity itself. It is not just from John’s apocalyptic pen that we learn of God’s coming judgment. We can see God’s wrath reflected in the agony of his Son on the cross. It is not just from Jesus’ mouth that we learn of God’s love. We know from Jesus’ daily walk with sinners like you and me.

Treasure God’s Word today. In everything you read, you will come to know the soul of God, he who is the lover of your soul.

Father, write your words on my heart today, that I might be your story written to a lost and dying world.

January 4

Pointing to Jesus

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.”

—John 14:6

By my office telephone I keep a list of people to call. People who are in chronic conditions, often living alone and in need of encouragement. I used to post the list for “something to do” when I had a free moment between appointments or dictating. But after a few calls my reasons changed. I keep the list for my *own* encouragement. When I find myself rushing ahead, operating on automatic energy rather than the grace of God, I know it’s time to stop, move to the phone, take a deep breath, and dial the number of a friend in need. Somehow, some way, when I hear that voice on the other end, when Scriptures are shared or hymns are sung over the lines, my office priorities straighten and my speed slows down.

It happened the other day when I called Bruce. He’s new to his wheelchair. Lost his job. His wife just filed for divorce. Bruce’s voice sounded tired from the hurt; my voice sounded tired from the hurry. We talked slowly, leaving lots of quiet spaces between our sentences. As his heart quickened, my heart, thankfully, slowed—soon our heartbeats matched each other’s as we discussed, mused over, reflected on, and sang about our Lord Jesus. His hurt was eased; my hurry was quieted. All because we focused ourselves on and centered our thoughts around and sang our songs to . . . Jesus.

Often, gently pointing people to Jesus is the only thing that helps. Those who are hurting are like the crying child who looks up into his daddy’s face and asks why. But the child doesn’t really want answers; he wants Daddy to pick him up, reassure him, and comfort him. People in pain don’t want a lot of words, they want the Word, the Word of flesh who felt the pang of death, too. He is the one, as I said to Bruce that day, who holds all the answers in his hands.

Lord Jesus, when I encounter those who hurt, enable me to point them to you, the only one who can satisfy their longings, who can comfort them and soothe their fears. In so doing, I am blessed.

January 5

A Near Miss

Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath.

—Psalm 39:4–5

I still get goose bumps thinking about a certain Friday night back in 1966. I had returned home early from a date to a dark and empty house, so before I went upstairs to bed, I grabbed a snack out of the fridge, sat at my baby grand piano and played a few favorites. Later as I was about to jump into bed, I heard a horrible crash from downstairs. With no one yet home and all the house still dark, I dived under the bed. I was convinced a burglar was in the house.

Thirty minutes ticked silently by with not a stirring anywhere. Cautiously I crept downstairs, flicking on lights as I went. When I switched on the living room lamp, I gasped. There, covering the piano bench, were huge, heavy elk horns. They had fallen from the high vaulted rafter above the baby grand. I looked closer and collapsed on the steps when I saw two of the horns piercing the thick wooden bench—the bench where I had sat only an hour earlier.

God only knows the times your life is threatened by near misses and almost accidents. Only heaven will reveal how the delays or detours we call frustrating have deflected deadly tragedy. Every once in a while God pulls back the invisible veil to show us “what could have been,” as in my elk horn story. I was saved for a purpose! And so are you. As Job tells us, “Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed” (Job 14:5).

*Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
That's Psalm 90 and it's also my prayer, O Lord.*

January 6
Epiphany

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

—Matthew 2:1–2

Seem odd to still be talking about Christmas? It shouldn't. Today marks the venerated twelfth day of Christmas. The holiday did not end on December 25; it began. You'd never know it. On the twenty-sixth, people immediately ceased singing “Joy to the World” and talking about Immanuel, God with us. It seemed unseasonable to talk about Jesus' birth even twenty-four hours after his birthday. Christmas cards and greetings looked “out of place.” Yet in ancient church times, people sang carols for a full twelve days after Christmas, at which time, on Epiphany Sunday, the celebration culminated with the appearance of the wise men from the east.

A friend of mine shows this in his living room manger scene. To his children's delight, he has the Magi appear somewhere on the other side of the room on the day after Christmas. With each passing day the threesome are moved closer to the manger scene, traveling past coffee tables and along the fireplace mantle until they reach the Christ child on Epiphany Sunday. The family continues to sing carols throughout the twelve days of Christmas, celebrating the fact that Jesus has come and is with us.

The new year looks bright because of Immanuel, God with us. Don't be timid about spreading a little Christmas joy, even this late in the holiday season. “You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isa. 40:9). In your quiet time today, pick your favorite Christmas carol and sing it to God with a heart full of holiday joy.

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

Lord, any season is the right season to spread the good news of “God with us.” Help me to do this today.

January 7

The Gift of the Magi

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

—Matthew 2:11

The number of wise men is never given in Scripture. The traditional notion that there were three wise men stems from the number of gifts they brought. These were not kings but Magi, or astrologers from the east. Some say they came from the area of Persia. Why would Persian astrologers be interested in the birth of a Jewish Messiah? How would they even know about him? Their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures could be traced back to the time of Daniel. Listen to what the Persians said about Daniel: “There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. . . . He was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar . . . appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners” (Dan. 5:11). Where else or from who else would Magi from the east learn about the Messiah except from Daniel?

By the time the wise men arrived, Mary and Joseph were living in a house, not a stable—possibly two years had passed since Jesus’ birth, given that Herod, in an attempt to kill Jesus, had ordered the death of “all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (Matt. 2:16). The Magi found the holy family and presented gold, frankincense, and myrrh, gifts suitable for a king. After Herod’s decree, Mary and Joseph escaped with Jesus to Egypt, where during the next two years they perhaps lived off the income from their expensive gifts.

Why give myrrh to a child? It’s a sticky, gum resin from a shrubby tree and is used as a painkiller or an embalming fluid. Little did the Magi or Mary know that myrrh would figure into the last days of the Messiah’s life on earth: first, Jesus refused myrrh when it was offered him on the cross to deaden his pain (Mark 15:23), and then, after Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross, Nicodemus wrapped it in seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloe (John 19:39).

Thank you for this lesson from your Word, Lord. Everything . . . fits!

January 8

Out of Season

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

—2 Timothy 4:2

It's easy to witness when it's easy. You wake up to a bright day brimming with possibilities, spiritual energy surging as you breeze out the door, giving your smile and a "God bless you" to everyone you encounter. You're stouthearted, you feel good, and God has never seemed so gracious. You're happy that neither headache, heartache, or backache distract you from freely offering words of witness. You are, as they say, witnessing "in season."

Then there are "out of season" days. Your shoulders sag, your heart feels dry, and you wonder if God has abandoned you for some more happy-spirited Christian. Before the day hardly begins, you write it off, promising God you'll be back in action tomorrow or at least by Sunday. You slump into retreat, hoping no one passes your car and "honks because they know Jesus." You're just not up for encouraging others in Christ.

But God is. He wants you to encourage and instruct in season and out of season, whether you're up for it or not. In fact, he may use those unseasonable moments more powerfully than the easy ones. God always honors gutsy faith, sacrificial service, and tough love. He is glorified when you push through the doldrums, shake off the fog, and shine his love. Sharing Christ out of season shows a real, lived-out human act of preference for him.

Are you out of season today, intending to take a break and some time off from encouraging others in Christ? Don't allow your emotions or the day's events to deter you from sharing the Word. The season may not seem opportune, but with Christ it always is. Encourage and instruct!

Lord, will you please be my energy today? Will you be my strength? Lend me your words, your attitude, and your desire. Help me to be your witness, no matter what the circumstances. I may be out of season, but I take you at your Word. I'm ready.

January 9
Acts of God

Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

—Lamentations 3:38

As I write, a fierce winter ice storm has hit the Northeast and parts of Canada. Televised reports show a winter wonderland, but a closer look reveals power lines sagging under heavy ice. Tree limbs have snapped, wires are down, and the entire city of Montreal has been plunged into darkness. Some say parts of Canada will be without power for a week. “Mother Nature has pulled a fast one,” reporters are saying.

The Bible says otherwise. When it comes to the physical world, God’s working is so discreet, so regular, that normally we cannot tell he’s involved. In fact, the so-called laws of nature are merely people’s descriptions of his usual dealings. When an ice storm strikes, it’s not irreligious for the Weather Channel to give a scientific explanation. Yet at the same time, today’s verse indicates that God has his hands on everything from the upper-atmospheric jet stream to the low pressure systems that are creating havoc across Canada today.

Is it Mother Nature? An act of God? The Lord answers in Isaiah 45:7: “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” When the death toll rises from a devastating tornado or a hurricane, people call such tragedies “acts of God.” The term is even used in insurance contracts for house damage caused by floods or fires. If we are quick to attribute weather calamities to God, let’s be fair and also credit him for beautiful breezes and balmy days. Remember, God forms not only darkness and disaster but light and prosperity.

Weather calamities make us feel out of control. This isn’t bad. Larger-than-life insecurities force people to wonder: “My life is so fragile. I’m confused when props are kicked out from under me. Maybe God is bigger and more awesome than I realized!”

What’s the weather like outside your window today? Use the weather report to jump-start a prayer to God about his awesome power over nature.

When I feel the cold—or the warmth—today, may I praise you, Lord, for all your acts in nature.

January 10

Humble Yourself . . . How?

In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.

—2 Chronicles 33:12

Manasseh was one evil dude. Although he was a leader in Israel, he threw infants on the sacrificial fire to appease pagan gods. After he was captured by the Assyrians, bound in shackles, and led away to Babylon by a hook in his nose, he “humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.”

We wouldn't want Manasseh's experience, but we do want to be humble. So we uproot all the “pagan gods” in our life, such as petty resentments and an overstuffed ego. Yet when we drive ourselves to our knees for sin's sake or our sake or the sake of our marriages or churches, friendships or family, we fail. If we're looking for humility, we don't look at ourselves or how greatly we miss the mark; we gaze at God. We seek his favor. We humble ourselves *before the Lord*.

To humble yourself before the Lord is to meditate on, brood over, muse upon, and consider the Lord and his greatness. An old Puritan, in *The Valley of Vision*, wrote, “Let me never forget that the heinousness of sin lies not so much in the nature of the sin committed, as in the greatness of the person sinned against.”³

By the way, Manasseh was not only forgiven but reinstated as king of Israel. What an incredible example of the enormous extent to which God will go to forgive. But remember that Manasseh humbled himself *greatly*.

Ponder the greatness of God today. You'll find yourself becoming slow to speak and quick to listen, thanking busboys at restaurants, praying more fervently, pinch-hitting for the Toddler Praise lady who usually does diaper duty, and sacrificing an extra hour of sleep in the morning for a more earnest quiet time.

Keep me from growing self-sufficient today, Lord. Help me to focus not on my pride but on you, not so much on my sin as on the greatness of you whom I have sinned against. Please give me the spirit of humility.

January 11

Humble Yourself before the Cross

They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

—Zechariah 12:10

Yesterday we learned that if we're looking for humility, we gaze at God. More specifically, we focus on Christ. No, even more humbling, we drag ourselves to the cross. It is there that pride is suffocated . . . self withers . . . and humility results. Why the cross? Because the spirit of humility is lavished not on the deserving but on the undeserving. Nowhere do we recognize ourselves as more undeserving than in the shadow of the cross.

How do you humble yourself before the cross? Just take a look up into the night sky. Jesus, who set suns and stars spinning in motion, who dreamed up not just our galaxy, which is one hundred thousand light-years across, but a billion other galaxies the Hubble telescope will never photograph; this Jesus who “determines the number of the stars” and “gives to all of them their names” (Ps. 147:4 RSV), looking at the distinctiveness of each star and then dreaming up a name that fits; this same Jesus who on the cross did not suspend his commands for squirrels to hibernate or birds to fly south; Jesus who held together by his word the very sinews and joints in the hands that hammered spikes into his wrists; this same Jesus bore his Father's wrath against you and your sin when he hung on the cross.

Amazing love! How can it be that God should plunge the knife in his own chest for me and you—for us who yawn and make a mental note to get a manicure when we lift the Communion cup to our mouth? Humility is just another word for the little-last-lost-least position we hold when gazing at Christ.

Tackle a word study of *redemption* and *reconciliation*, *atonement* and *propitiation*. When you meditate on exactly what occurred at the cross, you'll be inviting the spirit of humility.

Lord, if you could make yourself “of no reputation,” as it says in your Word, so can I. I humble myself before you, Lord Jesus.