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Q&A#136 John 7—Is it ever OK to Lie?

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Today's question: "In John 7, Jesus' brothers urge him to go to the feast in Judaea. He declines, stating he will not go. His brothers set off without him. But then Jesus *does* go. Secretly. Halfway through the feast, he makes himself quite public by teaching in the temple.

What's up with this? Why did he lie to his brothers? He's Jesus, so he must have known he was going to attend the feast, and that what he was saying to his brothers wasn't true. And why did he keep a low profile there, around everyone, if he was just going to end up teaching in the temple anyway?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today is going to be my last episode of this podcast for a number of weeks. Over the next two and a half months, I'm going to be traveling in the US, and you'll be hearing from me intermittently at best during that period of time.

I have a number of transcripts that I've been waiting to publish that will be published over this period. And apart from that, you'll have occasional articles, things like that. But you will not be hearing from me on a daily basis.

I'm sure there's plenty of material in my back catalogue for you to work through over that period of time. Today's question. First of all, no reason to apologize for this question.

This is a very thoughtful question and one that many theologians have debated over the years. Just a few weeks ago, I got into a discussion with someone doing theological research about this very question. So there's plenty to think about here.

And it's not a novice question. It's a good thing to notice. It's also something that has been raised as an objection against Christianity by a number of pagans and non-Christians.

So this is an important question to answer. When we're looking through the Gospel of John, it can help to answer questions like this, to consider something about the character of John's Gospel as a book. When you look through John's Gospel, often you'll see that the chapters have a surface meaning.

But then when you probe a little deeper, the surface meaning discloses a deeper significance, a symbolic meaning. And this chapter is one example. So the discussion about going up to the feast, it may seem just incidental, just this is something that happened.

But when you look at it against the background of the larger chapter and its themes, it's connected. It helps us to understand something more about what's going on. Another thing you'll notice with John's Gospel is that there are connections between different parts of the group, the book, that comment upon each other.

So if you're reading something like John, chapter five, with Jesus healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda, and then you read John, chapter nine, alongside John, chapter five, you'll find that there are great parallels. These two stories tell of healings on the Sabbath that ultimately lead to conflicts with the Jews. They both involve healing pools and washing.

And there are these sorts of parallels that help us to hold those two stories alongside each other in ways that shed light upon both. There's a theological light that is shed when you explore the parallels and juxtapositions between those two frames of the story. Another example might be the way that Jesus talks about in John, chapter three.

Now, that is a statement made to Nicodemus. But when you read later on in the book, you'll see that same sort of language coming out in a different context. And those two contexts shed light upon each other.

So in chapter eight, verse 14, Jesus answered and said to them, even if I bear witness of myself, my witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you do not know where I come from and where I am going. And within the context of John, chapter three, and in the context of John, chapter eight, there are a lot of other parallels that you see.

The parallels between themes of judgment and witness, the parallels between questions of origin. Where does Jesus truly come from? These questions then, held alongside each other, help to open up those passages. When we're looking at John, chapter seven, then, that initial question that is presented by the brothers, it might be worth thinking about whether we have a parallel with that elsewhere in the book of John.

So in John, chapter seven, verse one following, it says, After these things, Jesus walked in Galilee, for he did not want to walk in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him. Now, the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand. His brothers therefore said to him, depart from here and go into Judea, that your disciples also may see the works that you are doing.

For no one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world. But even his brothers did not believe in him.

Then Jesus said to them, my time has not yet come, but your time is always ready. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it, that its works are evil. You go up to the feast.

I am not yet going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come. When he had said these things to them, he remained in Galilee. But when his brothers had gone up, then he also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were, in secret.

Now, you'll notice in verse eight that that has a slightly different translation. It doesn't say, for I am not going up to this feast. It says, I'm not yet going up to this feast.

And some translations have that, or some of the original versions have that. Now, I would say it's more likely that it's saying not go up to this feast. But that's one possible solution to the question.

But what is the parallel that we might have with this? What other passage might this remind you of in the Book of John? Well, I would say the story of John, chapter two. In John, chapter two, on the third day, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. And the mother of Jesus was there.

Now, both Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, they have no wine. Jesus said to her, woman, what does your concern have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.

His mother said to the servants, whatever he says to you, do it. And then Jesus goes on to perform his miracle. What's going on with that initial conversation? Many people have puzzled over this.

But when we hold it alongside John, chapter seven, you should notice some parallels. In both cases, a member of Jesus' family is asking him to perform some or to reveal himself openly. In the beginning of John, chapter two, Jesus, his mother, wants him to perform some sort of miracle to provide wine.

Now, that would mean his open revelation. It would imply that he would be openly revealed. And he says, my time has not yet come.

His brothers in chapter seven make a similar request that he would reveal himself openly in Judea at the feast. That here you are in the context of Galilee. I mean, this is just the regional division.

You need to go national with this stuff. This is stuff for the big leagues. If you really are serious about this mission, then show yourself openly to all the people of Israel.

And there's a similar underlying theme in both of these chapters. Is Jesus going to reveal himself openly before the time? Now, in both cases, Jesus gives a rebuff to the request. In John, chapter two, he says, woman, what does your concern have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.

So seemingly says no. And then he goes ahead and performs the miracle in a different way, not openly, but secretly. In the second passage in John, chapter seven, there is a similar theme where the brothers request something of him, that he would go up to the feast and reveal himself openly and perform signs so that people would believe in him.

And then he rebuffs them too with a similar response when he says, my time has not yet come. Again, it's the same response. But then he does go up.

And when he does go up, he reveals himself, but in a different sort of way. And we'll get to that in a moment. So holding these two passages alongside each other, it invites us to look a bit more closely at both of them.

In John, chapter two, Jesus, Jesus' miracle takes a particular form. And one of the things you need to notice is the play upon knowing and not knowing within that particular account. Within John, chapter two, the servants know where the wine has come from or the water that has become wine.

Whereas the master of the feast and the bridegroom do not. There are certain people who are privy to the miracle and others who are not. Certain people who are in the know, who know the secret and others who do not.

And that's a similar thing that you see in chapter seven and eight. Within those chapters, there's a similar theme playing beneath the surface. One of knowledge and lack of knowledge.

One of revelation and hiddenness. So at the very start, you see Jesus going up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. And then at the very end of John, chapter eight, then they took up stones to throw at him.

But Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them and so passed by. In both of these places, you're seeing a theme of hiddenness and not knowing where someone has come from. We'll get to that theme of not knowing where someone has come from.

If you look at chapter two, that's one of the things that you notice. Where has this wine come from? The master of the feast does not know. And as Jesus talks about in John, chapter three, the one who was born of the spirit and the wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone born of the spirit. The question of where something comes from. The master of the feast does not know where the wine has come from.

And in chapter seven and eight, the similar question is asked, where are Jesus origins? How has he come? Are his origin known or are they hidden? And the question of whether he will go up to the feast and how he will go up to the feast is bound up with all of this. Is Jesus going to go up to the feast openly? His origins and his arrival being something of public fanfare? Or does he come secretly upon the scene and reveal himself in a way that certain people are in the know and others do not know in a way that's both hidden and revealed at the same time. And so this discussion about how he's going to come about, whether he's going to go up to the feast and his decision to go up secretly is connected to the broader question of Jesus origins within these chapters.

Within these chapters, the question is the Messiah when he comes, we will not know where he comes from. But Jesus, we seem to know where this guy has come from. But then Jesus points out that they do not know truly where he has come from.

And the verse I read earlier that they are not aware of where he has come from. And they do not know the father. And as a result, they're not able to perceive him.

This hiddenness and this knowledge and revelation are juxtaposed with each other. And they're playing into the surface level narrative plot. But they're deeper within the symbolism of the chapter as well.

And so when you're reading the plot of these chapters, pay attention to the details because the details are often signs. If you're reading chapter five, for instance, the healing at the sheep pool, what you should notice is that there are details there that

arrest attention, our attention. So the man has been infirm for 38 years and not able to enter into the city.

He's stuck by the sheep pool, not able to go past it. Waiting for the water of the sheep pool to be troubled by the angels so that he can cross, go into it and enter into the city. What's going on here? Well, 38 years is the same amount of time as Israel wandered in the wilderness after their rebellion.

So they're in the wilderness for two years and then as a result of their rebellion, 38 more years. So here is a man who symbolizes the situation of Israel, waiting for that water to be troubled by the angels so that he can cross, go into the water and then enter into the city. He's stuck outside of the promised land, as it were, waiting to be let across the Jordan and to be made part of the life of the promised land.

He's stuck outside. And so there's a picture here that operates on a very narrative surface level. Here's a man that needs healing.

But on the deepest symbolic level, here's a man who represents the state of Israel, the state of Israel prior to the entrance of the promised land in the book of Joshua. But also the state of Israel at that period of time where it needs a new exodus. And so these chapters should be read on different levels, recognizing that John is a master storyteller who is exploring some of the ways in which a narrative plot can reveal deeper symbolism.

As you read these stories alongside each other, as you read them alongside the symbolism of the Old Testament, other things like that, you'll find that the passages start to unfurl like flowers opening up. There's a lot hidden within them, a lot of beauty. But you need to tarry with them and you need to think about how is the narrative surface of this plot playing out? How can the details of this story be illumined by other stories within that gospel? So, for instance, knowing that the water in the great pouring ceremony on the great day of the feast, in the feast of tabernacles that Jesus is coming to, is associated with the Pool of Siloam.

It might help us to understand why the Pool of Siloam is mentioned in chapter nine. It might also help us to understand the details of Jesus' speech in chapter seven. In these cases, what we're seeing is some of it of contextual details, some of its details from elsewhere in the gospel that help to reveal that there is a level in which Jesus' teaching is playing off other details of the context or other details of the text that we may not have initially recognized.

As we look deeper, we'll find out that it's there. So let's get to the specific question. Once we've recognized that John is doing things with this narrative theme of hiddenness and revealedness of secrecy and openness and knowledge and lack of knowledge, we can see that there is some significance to this initial Jesus rebuff of the initial request.

There's a time for this to be done. And Jesus' time has not yet come. So he will go up to the feast, but he'll do so in a hidden way.

Much as he will perform the miracle of turning the water into wine, but he'll do so in a hidden way. And he won't do it in a way that leads to the knowledge being spread to everyone in an open act of pyrotechnics. Rather, he does it in an indirect way where he does it, as it were, from a distance.

He doesn't touch the water. He doesn't act upon the water directly. Rather, he tells the servants to do something with the water.

And there are certain people in the know. There are certain people who are not. There are certain people who know where it comes from.

Again, think about the ways that these key expressions are being used and played upon. And there are other people who do not know. There are people who do not know where it comes from.

And there are other people who do know where it comes from. And that divide is one that plays out in the story and theology of John more generally. Now, why does Jesus not tell the truth to his brothers? First of all, we might think partly this might be just a translation issue.

It may be that some of the versions that have talked about Jesus not yet going up to the feast, that those are the ones that we should follow. I'm not sure that's the case. And I think there are other ways of approaching this.

The other question we might ask is whether we're talking about a more limited response, that Jesus, by saying, I'm not going up to the feast, what he means by that is I am not going up to the feast with you at this moment in time. That there is that very specific sense that his words have. And I think that's a reasonable way of approaching the question.

And that might be what he's saying. One way or another, though, he's giving his brothers a misapprehension of his plans concerning the feast. And that raises questions which I'll get into.

So there are a couple of routes that we there are a number of routes that we can take with this. We can say that Jesus might be partly to do with the version of the text that we're working with, partly due to a translation issue, perhaps. Or it might be a matter of just recognizing this is a more limited response.

The question then comes, how are we to think about truth more generally? What does it mean to tell the truth? And I think there have been sophisticated discussions of this that may shed light upon this particular point. When we think about truth, how do we think

about truth? Do we think about truth as just formal accuracy? So formal truth telling as just representing reality in a fully accurate manner? Or is there something more to truth than that? And I think there is something more to truth and truth telling than that. And there are certain times when we might think that it is inappropriate to tell the truth because the truth just is an act of violence.

Now, there have been some TV shows in the past that have played with the revelation of truth. So-called truth in a public forum in a way that has been deeply unseemly. And I think in the UK context, the Jeremy Kyle show that's just been cancelled.

That show is one that's played upon revelations of paternity tests and revelations of polygraph tests and all these other sorts of things. It's about the revelation of truth in a way that breaks up relationships in a way that airs people's dirty linen in a public way. And other shows have had even more unseemly approaches to this.

Where, for instance, I think there was one show a while back where you had to go through a series of truth telling things with a polygraph, strapped up to a polygraph test. And ask ever more answer ever more invasive questions. Now, that is not truth telling.

That's a violation of truth. Now, that might seem strange to us. Truth is formal accuracy.

So if I tell the truth about some situation that is deeply invasive to someone's privacy, or if I tell the truth about something that is deeply humiliating to someone. That isn't that truth telling. It's formally accurate.

I don't think that's the case. I think when we think about that sort of speech, it's a violation. It's something that actually is not truthful.

And maybe we should think about truth not so much as formal accuracy, about representation of the objective reality of the situation in a full and complete sense. Rather, we can think in terms of truth telling as something that properly negotiates the bonds that exist between people of dealing truthfully with people. Now, to be true to someone is a different thing from telling them, disclosing to them everything in a complete and unrestrained way.

Indeed, that can often be a violation of truth. It can be something that is not dealing truthfully with someone. It's not maintaining those right bonds and not maintaining the right face that we should have with someone.

There are other occasions we might think about where truth telling in that formal sense, merely formal sense, is something that violates and puts other people in danger. We think about the classic case of the Nazis come to your door and the Jews are hidden in the cellar and they say, do you have any Jews hidden in this house? What do you say? Do you tell them the truth? Well, they do not have the right to the truth. They are not in a position to tell them the truth in that situation would be to violate the truth that exists

between you and the people that you're trying to protect.

It would be a violation of the order of dealing truthfully with your neighbor. What it would do is actually give them the means by which to destroy someone. And that's not something you're supposed to do.

Bonhoeffer and others have discussed this. For instance, when we think about the way in which some people might ask information of us that is not appropriate for them to have. There are ways in which we may have to cover up certain things that people do not have a right to know.

For instance, if someone asks an invasive question about your family, you may be in the right in putting them off the scent. Now, that's not because lying is OK. Lying is not OK.

Lying is something that is very clearly forbidden within scripture. But the question is, what does lying mean? Is lying just anything that falls short of formal truth in that more abstract sense? Or is lying about not dealing truthfully with our neighbor in a more relational sense that recognizes not just a sort of situational ethic, but something that recognizes the fabric of the bonds that exist between people and our duty to make sure that we're not lying. And we maintain and uphold the good of that.

Now, this sort of question is similar to the question of, is taking life in a situation of self-defense murder? There are certain occasions when we are justified in taking actions that would formally appear to have the character of sin. You might formally think that taking life in a situation of self-defense is murder. But calling it murder is a judgment upon it that is inaccurate in that particular situation.

That is not considered as murder. If it's a just situation of self-defense, you need to preserve life. You need to honor the life, even of the person who's attacking you.

So you don't use excessive force. And so the idea that we can use whatever force we want in order to defend ourselves is not legitimate. That is not an appropriate way to approach the question of self-defense.

But there are times when in the course of self-defense, we may need to take someone's life. And that is not murder. In the same way, in a situation where the Jews are hidden in your cellar, to put the Nazis off the scent by not telling them the truth of that situation is not to lie.

There is a situation there that is, when viewed in a broader framework, we see that there's no inconsistency here. There's no inconsistency with saying, you shall not murder and saying there are situations in self-defense when the taking of a life may be permitted. And so what we need to do is step back from just the formal principle, not taking a life under any circumstances, and think about the deeper principles that underlie that.

Since there seem to be exceptions to this, is God just saying, oh, in this particular realm, anything goes? Or is there a deeper principle that underlies that, that helps us to understand why it is appropriate to take life in this instance, whereas in all these other instances, it's a sin of the gravest magnitude? And I think there is a way of doing that and making that move and that we need to make that move, unless we just have this idea of exceptions, that all these sorts of exceptions that are allowed to this deeper moral principle. I don't think they are exceptions in actual point of fact. And when we're thinking about truth telling, I think we're dealing with something similar.

What we're trying to uphold is the fabric of truthful relations that exist between people. And there are occasions when someone would use formal truth to violate that. And in such situations, we do not give them formal truth that would violate that truthful relation.

And so if someone asks something very invasive of something that's private to you and your spouse, for instance, that's not something that they have a right to know. And you have the right to put them off the scent, even if that involves a lie. Ideally, you try and avoid that.

But it's like self-defense. You use the minimal amount of force necessary. And so you don't tell a lie if you can help it.

But there are certain occasions where you do tell a lie, can tell a lie to uphold the truth. Can think about this in situations of espionage and warfare. Can think about in other situations where people don't tell a lie explicitly, but lead to people having a misapprehension and purposefully produce a misapprehension of their intentions or their identity or their meaning, whatever it is.

Allow for people to misunderstand them. Now, I think we're maybe splitting hairs in some of these cases in saying that these are not lies. Now, I think it's maybe a minimization of force there.

But there are occasions in scripture where we do see people being given a false impression and being praised for that. We can think about the case of Rahab, where Rahab sends the men of Jericho out and puts them in a different, off the scent of the spies and then allows the spies to escape. And she's praised for that act.

She's praised for that act as an act of faith. Now, that act involves a lie. It involves giving the men of Jericho a false impression and false information.

Has she lied to them? I don't think she's lied to them in the sense that scripture condemns, in the sense of bearing false witness. Now, when we're thinking about the principle of bearing false witness against your neighbor, that can be important to recognize that it does not. The principle is not you shall not lie.

The principle is you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. And within that, there's a relational dimension, false witness against your neighbor. Now, would it be OK to bear true witness against your neighbor? In some cases, it would.

If it were true witness that were designed to protect the good and other things like that, then it could be. And it could be something that were and that is appropriate. But there are other occasions where bearing a certain sort of true witness against your neighbor is wrong.

There are certain forms of slander and gossip that spread something that may be true, but is inappropriate for public consumption or something that's intended to defame your neighbor or act in a violent way against your neighbor, sharing something that is not appropriate. And in those situations, the fact that it is against your neighbor comes to the foreground. It's not just about formal accuracy or inaccuracy.

That's not the thing that's primarily concerned with. We're primarily concerned with here. Rather, there's a deeper principle of truth, of maintaining the proper bonds that should exist between people and protecting those.

So in situations where someone is seeking to destroy those bonds, seeking to destroy life in those situations, it can be appropriate to take that person's life. If they're the aggressor and in order to defend from the in order to detect defend them from their murderous intent, you need to take their life. That can be legitimate.

It's the taking of life in the protection of life. And that's not the same thing as taking life under other circumstances. In the same way, when you're dealing with someone who is using truth as a weapon to destroy the social truth that should exist, the true dealings between people, then it's appropriate to use a minimal degree of misleading information or something to put people off the scent.

Of course, we need to be very careful about how we use these principles. And if this is seen as just a justification for any sort of duplicitous or shady dealings, then I think we're going to lead ourselves into very dangerous waters. The idea that, for instance, self-defense just gives you a free hand, that you can take life however you want if you're placed into a position of self-defense.

That's not legitimate. Rather, there's minimal force that's permitted. You don't want to use more than you need, any more than you need.

And it becomes something that starts to have the character of murder because you're taking the light in the permission, supposed permission that you have to take life. In the same way, if you believe that if you're looking for excuses to give people false information or lie to people or deceive people or something like that, there's something seriously wrong. It's a situation where you're not actually wanting to deal truthfully with

people, but you're wanting an excuse to deal unfaithfully and untruthfully with people.

We're called to speak the truth to our neighbor, and that requires representing things in a manner that is accurate, upholding the truthfulness of the social order, of keeping faith with our neighbor, these sorts of things. And when we do that, I think we'll find that we will be seeking at all costs to avoid telling falsehoods, to avoid giving people the false impression. What do we think about Jesus' case here, then? In Jesus' statement to his brothers, I think he was giving them a false impression, purposefully so.

He goes to the feast secretly rather than openly, hiddenly rather than in a revealed fashion. And he does so because of the nature of his mission. To actually go along with his brother's request or even to give them the, say, I'm going up, but not quite yet, that would actually undermine the character of what he was doing.

His time had not yet come. And it was not their right to tell him when his time was. That you need to reveal yourself right now.

We're going to push you into this situation where we precipitate some sort of conflict or some sort of event that will reveal your identity. That is not their right. And so they're not in a position to demand that of Christ.

And so Christ's response that puts them off the scent and rebuffs them is an appropriate one. It's not something that they had any right to demand of him. And the information of his coming and going again is something that's a matter of concern within this chapter.

Jesus keeps certain things secret about his identity and those identity, that identity that's held secret and certain people, just a few people know his disciples and others discover it. But there's a general secret, the messianic secret that is then later on revealed. This is something that is important.

Within the context of the gospels, John being one example of the way that this theme plays out. Also there in the synoptic gospels that Jesus does not reveal his identity openly. And for his brothers to push him to reveal that identity openly is inappropriate and it's a violation of his mission.

And so in that sort of situation, it is appropriate for him to put them off the scent. Now I think we need to be very careful about how we use this principle more generally. And many people might be nervous about even the way that I'm approaching it here.

But I think throughout scripture we see, we will see that as we look more closely, just as in the case of murder, there is not just an absolute formal principle. You must never take life under any circumstances. Or you must never depart from formal accuracy and you must give people the full, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

That is not actually what the principle is. The principle of not bearing false witness is

more complicated than that. It's got a deeper consistency, one that leads to certain apparent inconsistencies on the surface level.

But when you look a bit deeper, you'll see that it's founded upon our responsibility of truthful dealings with our neighbor. Now in situations where we may be dealing with hostile people, even in those situations, we should generally seek to tell the truth. To tell the truth in a way that represents our commitment to their good, our commitment to dealing faithfully with them, even if they deal unfaithfully with us.

Only in those situations where they are violating the truth, the truth of relations that should exist between people, or causing us to become complicit in an act of violence against others or something else like that. Or invading upon some, invading something that they have no right to. In those sorts of situations, we can use falsehood, informal falsehood as a sort of defense of the truth, the deeper truth of social, proper social relations, other things like that.

We also recognize that language functions in different ways. And so if we're merely talking about formal truth, there are many occasions where we have informal, or we have contexts where formal truth is not actually the criteria that we're, criterion that we're working in terms of. So there are many times when we're playing games or other things like that, where, or dealing with people in social situations where we're not telling the formal truth.

Rather, we're playing a game that is faithfully representing to each other, the actual situation, but is a different character than just of interaction than the one that's always direct and upfront. So for instance, if I'm in a context of a guest culture and someone says, would you like a cup of tea? I'll say, no, thank you. I'm fine.

Thank you very much for asking. And they'll say, you'll be having a cup of tea. And I'll say, no, no, I can't.

And then they'll say, oh, you must have a cup of tea. I'll say, oh, you're forcing me and I'll take a cup of tea. And that's a social game.

It's not lying. I've said that I won't have a cup of tea and all these other sorts of things. It's not lying.

It's playing a certain language game. And within that language game, it's understood how the game is playing out. And I think if we take that concept of formal truth too far, we end up tying ourselves in all sorts of knots and ruling out a lot of things that are completely legitimate.

However, if we deal with that deeper underlying principle, it may help us to understand things a bit better. I hope this is of some help. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and other podcasts, videos and the transcripts, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts. Just want to take this opportunity as well to thank everyone who has supported me in this way. It really has made such a difference.

It's an encouragement to know that I'm not just doing this by myself, but I have people who support me in this. It's an encouragement to know that I have the resources to work with, to develop things in different ways and to invest time in this. It's really been an encouragement.

So thank you for that. And for those of you particularly who've been supporting me for a number of months, that's really been a blessing. Lord willing, I'll be back again in a few weeks time.

God bless and thank you for listening.