



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Hebrews 6:1-12

“The Peril of Apostasy, or Renouncing the Crucified Savior” TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we give Thee thanks, again, for the Scriptures, for the light that they give to us, for the comfort and consolation they also give. And we thank Thee for the way in which they point us to the solution to the problem of sin in the atoning work of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And, again, Lord, we ask that Thou wilt give us guidance and direction as we study this marvelous little treatise, written by one of the members of the earliest church. We thank Thee for the teaching that Thou didst give to him and we pray, Lord, give us some of the same illumination that we may understand and profit from all that he has written concerning the ministry of our great High Priest. We thank Thee for him and for all of the aspects of that ministry, which are so important for us. Help us, Lord, to come to understand more fully how significant it is for us to have a High Priest, who continually prays for us, acts as our representative with our Father in heaven. We pray now Thy blessing upon each one present. May the problems and trials of our lives be seen in the marvelous provision made for each one of us, both now and forever.

We pray, In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Well, we're turning to Hebrews chapter 6, again, and this is our third of the studies concentrating on verse 1 through verse 12, and I'd like to read the twelve verses again, and

then we'll look into the exposition of the last part of it that we have not yet touched. So if you take your New Testaments, turn to Hebrews chapter 6 in verse 1. Our author writes.

“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away.”

And we have, remember, pointed out and this is so important to understand this passage that the correct translation of this is not to take that participle as a conditional participle, it cannot really be that. Those who translated this with an “if” overlooked the fact that our participle, I'll use a technical term, is an adjectival participle and not an adverbial participle. They have rendered it as if it is an adverbial participle; but there is in the original text a significant use of the article that makes that impossible. And so it is not “if they shall fall away” but “and have fallen away.” Our author is not talking about individuals who might fall away; he's talking about that which is true of those who possess these privileges and have fallen away. In other words, that pertains to the description of the individuals under discussion. So, we'll render it that way, and we can even translate it, “Then,” as the New American Standard Bible does, to clarify.

“And then have fallen away to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned. But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany

salvation, though we speak in this manner. For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

We’ve been saying, and this is the third time that we’ve said essentially the same thing in introduction, but this noted passage is the ace of the Arminians; that if one believes that it is possible to lose one’s salvation after one possesses it, this passage is one that probably is more useful to them because it does on the surface lend a great deal of support to that idea. We commented on the fact that this goes back to the source of Arminianism, generally traced to a Dutch theologian by the name of Jacob Harmenszoon, or Jacob Harmen-son, James, the son of Herman. Now, this Dutch theologian is not responsible for all of Arminianism, but he’s responsible for the significant part of it, and the Remonstrants, who really were the products of his teaching, developed it a good bit and it has been, also, developed further down through the years. But, Arminianism is traced to this man, whose Latin name is Arminius, James Arminius. And so Arminianism is the teaching that is traceable to Jacob Arminius or Jacobus Arminius to give his full Latin name.

One of the principle tenets of this particular way of looking at Christianity is the denial of the perseverance of the saints. Now, remember, we have said in connection with this that Arminians are not “non-Christians.” Fundamentally, Arminianism is another interpretation of Evangelical Christianity; there are two of them, Calvinism and Arminianism; these two interpretations of Evangelical Christianity. There are some logical implications of both of these systems; but, nevertheless, when we talk about Arminianism, we’re not necessarily talking about someone who’s not a Christian man. If we say, “He’s an Arminian,” as a matter of fact, we generally mean he’s an evangelical man; he belongs within the Christian company, he just doesn’t understand the Bible, I would say as a Calvinist, in a more complete and accurate way.

But one of the principle tenets of Arminianism was the denial of the perseverance of the saints. In fact, some insisted that you cannot have assurance of salvation unless you’ve had special personal revelation from God the Holy Spirit. That is, a vision in which you have been told you are one of the elect and will persevere. That, of course, is an extreme form of denial; but nevertheless, it is historically true of some.

I think I made reference to the country fellow, speaking about the reality of salvation, who said, “I don’t want that kind of religion that I can get and not know it; cause I might lose it and not miss it.” [Laughter] Well, Arminians, they do believe by their doctrine that one can know he has salvation but he might lose it. And so Arminianism rests on the interpretation of a number of passages in the Bible; this being one of the chief ones. And, usually, this is one of the first texts to which an Arminian will turn, if you have a discussion with them. So you must be prepared, if you are convinced that’s the wrong interpretation of evangelical Christianity, to answer the objections that might arise from this text.

We’ve also laid emphasis upon the fact that sound hermeneutics or principles of interpretation are demanded in this passage. Of course, those principles are determined in the interpretation in any passage. We have to follow certain principles; but it’s especially true in the difficult passages that we be careful to remember the things that are important, if we are to find the meaning of biblical texts. We must pay attention to the immediate context before us, here. We must also pay careful attention to the context of this book as a whole. In other chapters of the book certain things often throw light upon the passage that we are studying. And then we also underline the fact that the Bible is a unity. That is, it’s one of our convictions. Our, I mean, those who follow a similar line of interpretation; one of our fundamental presuppositions that the Bible is a unity, that is, the authors do not contradict one another. And if we find contradictions, it’s because we have not fully understood one or the other of the texts that we are studying. So we must approach it in that way, otherwise we will misinterpret the Bible.

Remember, that beautiful, beautiful verse, “Wonderful things in the Bible we see, things that are put there by you and by me.” And sometimes that is true of all of us. We have, if we’ve lived long enough, we’ve known passages that we have misinterpreted.

I once have misinterpreted one, too. [Laughter] But [Dr. Johnson rattles a piece of paper and there’s more laughter.] Well, I would like to have a quarter or a dollar for every passage I know now I’ve misinterpreted in the past. I would be a rather wealthy old man. But I don’t have that; so I’ll just have to confess that I’ve misinterpreted many a passage in the Bible. I’m still discovering things from the study of the word of God. That’s why, I believe, that it’s important for us to continue to study the Bible until we are placed in the grave.

Now, remember the progression of thought. The author wishes the stagnant, Hebrew professing believers to go on in the faith. He has said, he does not want them to go over the elementary principles that have to do with the Messiah, he wants them to go beyond that. And he names those elementary principles; and we pointed out that each one of them may be related to the Old Testament teaching, the preparatory teaching, of the Messiah who is to come; very important teaching because Christianity is built upon the Old Testament revelation. We could not understand Christianity if we did not understand the Old Testament. That’s why to study the Old Testament is so important for us. We sometimes neglect that. We even have Christians who will say, “That’s the old Bible, and we don’t have to have anything to do with it. We are in the part of divine progress of redemption that the New Testament has to do with, and therefore we don’t need the Old Testament.”

Have you ever noticed how often the New Testament writers cite the Old Testament in order to substantiate points that they are making? So this author would like his readers to go beyond those things. He calls them the elementary principles that have to do with the Messiah. And he says that we will do that, “if God should permit it.” What a strange thing? Surely, God would permit it, you might think.

Well, there's one condition, at least, under which he will not permit it. And that condition is if they are apostates. In case they are apostates, then, of course, he cannot permit it. That's the point our author is making. That is, apostasy is irremediable.

Now, of course, to know what is apostasy in the sight of God, requires divine knowledge and, I or you, are unable to know specifically with reference to an individual when a person has become an apostate. We may listen to his words and say from his words that it appears that he is. He made a profession of faith, now he denies everything. But in the final analysis, it's the Lord God who determines who is and who isn't an apostate. What we do know is that apostasy, as our author sets it forth, is irremediable.

Now, that's the proposition, in verse 4 through verse 6, “For,” he says, “it is impossible.” He does not say “it's hard, it's difficult.” He says, “It is impossible.”

You remember the doctor who gave the young man a prescription which, among other things, concluded with, take one pill three times a day. And the young man said, “That's impossible.” Well, I guess he could have taken it three times a day, but it wouldn't have been very nice to have to have it come up and then re-take it, three times. So, he said, “That's impossible.” But our author is talking about something that's even more impossible; that is, if a person is an apostate, it's impossible to renew him again unto repentance.

Now, this description, which we're going to look at now. In the last meetings, someone rushed out afterwards. I walked out of the door there and said, “Oh, I need to understand what these things mean here, when it says, ‘once enlightened, have tasted of the heavenly gift’” cause I haven't said anything about that, so far. And I said to her, “We're going to take that up next time.” And so tonight we're going to look at what it means to be “once enlightened, to have tasted of the heavenly gift, to have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, to have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and have fallen away.”

So the description of the persons is the first thing that we want to look at. This is a lengthy statement. The author describes a certain class of persons, he expresses a fact about them, and then

he gives the reason for that fact. You'll notice, he describes the facts about them, then he says, “They have fallen away.” And then in verses 7 and 8, he says, “Why these things I cannot do.” Well, I guess I should say, rather, in verse 6, at the end of the verse. He says “why it's impossible.” “Since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” So from verse 4 through verse 6, we have the description of the individuals, the description of them, the facts about them, and the cause of this fact of impossibility.

Now, these expressions, these descriptions, “once enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God and tasted the powers of the age to come,” are largely, without parallel in the Bible. They are largely without parallel in the New Testament. It would be so helpful if we had these same expressions in other contexts. That would give us some clues as to the meanings of these expressions. But they are largely without parallel in the New Testament. And so, I think it's fair, I believe our Arminian friends would agree that dogmatism about the meaning of these things in this instance would be in very poor taste. I mean, spiritual taste, as an interpreter of the word of God.

In my view, they reflect the preliminary nature of the Old Testament revelation and it's fulfillment in the New Testament. And so, basically, that's the way that I will look at them. Now, let's take a look at them.

He says, “it is impossible for those who were once enlightened.” What does it mean to be enlightened? Now, for some people, to be enlightened would, necessarily, mean that they were converted. Now, it is true, of course, that all people who are converted have been enlightened. But the question is, whether all who have been enlightened are converted?

Now, let me give you an illustration. Turn to Numbers chapter 24, and we'll read some of the things that were said about this Old Testament prophet. He is an Old Testament prophet; but the New Testament makes it pretty plain, he's not a true prophet but a false prophet. Listen to what is said about Balaam in Numbers chapter 24 in verse 4. “He hath said,” now, I'll read my text that was another translation. “The utterance of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of

the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open.” The Authorized Version renders it, I believe, “He hath said, which hath heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open. Now, turn to verse 16, “He hath said, which heard the words of God, and knew the knowledge of the Most High.” This is Balaam. “Knew the knowledge of the Most High, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open.”

Now, in the New Testament, there are three texts that the New Testament, in which the New Testament refers to Balaam there may be more, I think, there are only three, I didn’t bother to check again. Jude verse 11 says, “Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the game saying of Korah.” These are words about the false prophets that Jude speaks. Peter also speaks in 2 Peter 2, of false prophets, and he says, verse 15 of 2 Peter 2, “which have forsaken the right way and have gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.” And then Revelation chapter 2, verse 14, about Balaam, also. “But I have a few things against thee,” the author says, with reference to the church there, “because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.”

Now, that would indicate that Balaam had a great deal of the knowledge of the Lord God; a prophet, one who gave prophecies. And, furthermore, have you ever studied those prophecies? There are four prophecies, four magnificent messianic prophecies! They are not prophecies about insignificant things; they are prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and the things that would be characteristic of his person and kingdom. So out of his mouth and out of his head have come some magnificent prophecies that are part of the word of God. And, yet, the New Testament, apparently, regards Balaam as among those who are lost, by the description. The point I am making is simply this; it’s possible to have a great deal of light and still not be a genuine believer in Christ.

The second thing is “tasted the heavenly gift.” Now, unfortunately, there are no parallels for “tasted the heavenly gift,” that I know of. And so, consequently, we have to just speculate in the

light of total, since he’s talking about Old Testament things in this book so strongly, that probably that’s a reference to understanding the truth of the new Messianic Age into which the believers of the Epistle to the Hebrews have entered.

Then he says something that sounds more common to us. “Have become partakers of the Holy Spirit.” Now, it’s possible, of course, to partake of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in different ways. It’s possible to partake of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as believers do today, most of us, when we are genuine believers, all of us, we receive the Holy Spirit as the indwelling third person of the Trinity, according to the promise our Lord made in John chapter 14, verse 16 and verse 17. “I will pray the Father, He will give you the Holy Spirit, and He will be an everlasting comforter for you. He will be with you forever.” That’s characteristic of this age that every single believer has the everlasting, indwelling, of the Holy Spirit.

But now, “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” in other ways, may not necessarily involve that. For example, if you’ll turn back to chapter 2 in verse 3 and verse 4, and while you’re finding that, I’ll read verse 3, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness, both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will.”

Now, in other words, he acknowledges here that he and they have already known about the work of the Holy Spirit in the confirmation of the word of God; the word that was confirmed by those that heard him. “God bearing witness, both with signs and wonders and various signs or miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will.” He refers, of course, to the mighty working of the Holy Spirit in the signs and wonders that characterized the ministry of our Lord and the ministry of the apostles. To “partake” of that, is to have been there. And that, of course, is what he is talking about. They have partaken of that because they’ve lived in that age. Like the Galatians, in chapter 3, Paul speaks to them and says to them, “Are you so foolish, having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh.” And he defines that in verse 2, “This only I want to learn from you, did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?” “Have you

suffered so many things in vain?” And then verse 5, “Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” So the early Church experienced the outworking of the power of God in the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the apostles, and so in that sense, they were “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” it could be said.

Fourthly, “tasted the good word of God.” Now, that expression is, there’s a similar expression in Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 10 and 33:14. But, again, it is not specifically spelled out. Perhaps in the light of the fact that that section of Jeremiah is a section in which Jeremiah is laying great stress on the New Covenant that is to come, and the promises of forgiveness that are related to it, those sovereign promises of the unconditional New Covenant, I would suggest that what “tasted the good word of God” has to do with is the Messianic promises of the Old Testament. And to have “tasted” them is to have come to hear of them and to have come to an understanding of them. I don’t think the taste means to sip, as if they had only a little bit. And if they had truly tasted them and eaten them, it would have been different. In other words, I don’t think this Greek word *geu* is intended to suggest it was not a full participation. What is the truth of it, I believe, is the reference to the Messianic promises and they have truly come to understand what they are.

The other day, when we were talking with the two Jewish Rabbis, one of the points that we were discussing was the question of whether a Jewish person, after they have converted to Christianity, could be called a Jew, still? Now, we were, the two Rabbis, one of them, particularly, was trying to make the point that if a Jewish person converts, he’s no longer a Jew. We were saying he is a Jew; he is, however, a converted Jew. That is, his Jewish-ness is something with which he is born and possesses for forever. But his conversion to Christ is coming to the understanding of the Messiah and the receiving of him. After our discussion, and obviously the one who was particularly talking was not willing to accept that. We tried to point out that the early church was largely Jewish and the Jews then regarded them as being still Jews, even though they would probably have regarded them as apostate Jews, but they were still Jews. And, finally, one of the Rabbis said, as the discussion came to an end, “Well, I understand what you are saying, I just don’t agree with it.” So it is possible.

I use that only as an illustration, not to say that that discussion could not have gone on, with probably some more light given, but the point is that it is possible to understand and not really accept is the point that I’m making.

Then he mentions the “powers of the age to come.” This would seem to me to be the external side of the third thing. “Partakers of the Holy Spirit.” They have now, as he said, “have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come.” In those miracles that were performed by our Lord, and performed by the apostles, they had in the experience of them an indication, a true indication, of the power of the age that is to come the millennial age the age of the greatest of all of the miracles that will be performed. So that is the external side, it appears to me, of the third partakers of the Holy Spirit.

And then the sixth thing that is said about them, “and have fallen away.” What have they fallen away from? Well, they’ve fallen away from their profession of their faith. What have they fallen away to? Now, Christians differ among themselves over the answer to that second question. “To what have they fallen?” Some have suggested they have fallen away to fruitlessness. But they are still believing people, taking these things that we’ve talked about as being true and determinative of the possession of Christian life. And so to fall away is to fall away, not to loss of salvation, because I am talking about those who believe in the perseverance of the saints; they fall away to fruitlessness in the Christian life. It is possible, of course, if an Arminian is dealing with this, to say this means they have fallen away to loss of salvation.

Now, in my opinion, this does mean they are falling away to a lost state. But it’s also a state from which or yes from which they have, well, I don’t know how to put this, it’s their state but they have never been saved. It’s a state into which they’ve fallen but not out of salvation. In other words, they were never saved and they have now fallen away and they have irrevocably fallen away. For example, when the writer says in chapter 2 in verse 3, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation.” What does neglect of salvation mean? Well, it might mean neglect and then, remaining within the sphere of the saved, but neglecting the full enjoyment of it. In chapter 3, in verse 12, we

read, “Beware, brethren, lest there shall be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”

Departing from what? Well, we might say, departing from a full understanding and appreciation of salvation. And now, we’ve apostatized from that, but we are still in the family of God. Unfortunately, those passages do not tell us what it is from which they have departed. And, in the case of chapter 2, it does not tell us that from which we have fallen, if we neglect so great salvation.

So as we look at the warnings of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we have to look for a passage that really tells us what it is they have departed from. Now, there is one passage in chapter 10, I think, that makes the point that underlines the necessity of an interpretation having to do with apostasy. In chapter 10 in verse 39, in the last of the great warnings of the Epistle to the Hebrews, there is a warning following that, but it’s not one of the great warnings. He says, “But we are not of those who draw back to perdition.” Now, perdition is a reference to loss of salvation. It is possible that this verb, this word, does refer to something that is not eternal perdition, but never in the sense in which it is found in a context like this. “We are not of those who draw back to perdition.” The very fact that the “drawing back” is a drawing back to perdition indicates that the falling away is a falling away to perdition, falling away to loss of salvation, that brings all of the warnings of the Epistle to the Hebrews in harmony. So to fall away is to fall away from salvation and it’s to fall away into perdition, loss, loss in the sense of eternal lost condition. So my opinion, this is what the author is talking about here when he says, “And have fallen away.” They have fallen away from a profession of faith and they have fallen away to perdition.

Now, let’s grant the difficulty for each of the interpretations, the Arminian interpretation and the Calvinistic interpretation because, I think, anyone who studies this with an open mind, who has some ability to interpret the word of God, will acknowledge this is not an easy passage. So let’s acknowledge that it’s a difficult passage. But now, let’s notice in support of the Calvinistic interpretation, let’s notice further things that are said about these individuals; and, things that are also

“not” said about them. We’ve had these five things, and then the sixth, “And then they’ve fallen away,” from it.

When you think of a person who possesses eternal life, what do you think about when you think of them? Well, for example, if you read the New Testament, one of the things you would be looking for would be, are they said to be righteous? Are they said to be justified? Because that’s one of the great Pauline teachings. And what do you find here? Well, there’s no reference to justification. Now, you might say, well, perhaps the author did not really know the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. But in chapter 11, verse 7, he says, “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.” So he knew about justification by faith. But he doesn’t say these individuals have been justified. We think of a person who is saved as having life, don’t we? Yes! Life, eternal life! Life! There is no reference to life in the description of these individuals. And yet, of course, he knew about life. In chapter 10 in verse 38, he writes, “Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” He knew about Habakkuk. He cites Habakkuk chapter 2, verse 4. But he doesn’t say these individuals have life. That would settle the question, would it not?

Then also, he knows about salvation because he’s already said in chapter 2, we shouldn’t neglect salvation. But he doesn’t say with reference to these that they are saved, in the description. Later on in verse 9, he says, “But beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you.” In other words, the things that he is confident of about them are better than the things that he’s just been describing. And he says that they are things that concern salvation. The “better things” concern salvation. And they pertain to them. So it’s obvious, it seems to me, that he’s not thinking of these individuals as “saved” individuals. He’s say, “You,” the great mass of you, “I’m persuaded of your salvation. But I’m not persuaded of these,” is the point.

One other thing, he doesn’t say anything about spiritual fruit with reference to these who are described in verse 4 through verse 6. He doesn’t say that “you’ve tasted the good word of God and

you’ve ministered to the benefit of the saints,” or anything like that. So there is no reference to spiritual fruit, although when he goes to describe the Hebrew professing believers of whose salvation he is confident, later here in verse 11 and 12 and 13, and so on. He says, “You have ministered and are ministering,” actually. So all of this, it seems to me, makes it very evident that these individuals who are described in verse 4 and verse 5 and verse 6 are individuals who have a great deal of knowledge of the truth and of the Old Testament, of Old Testament elementary principles, but have not entered into an experience of Christian faith. They are not saved, as he says. “But beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you,” things that accompany salvation.

Now, what we’ve been saying is that he thinks the vast majority of the ones to whom he’s writing are truly saved. But he’s concerned about some as he says here in verse 11. “We desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end.” This description is a description that disturbs him. He’s given it because it’s a description of those who have a lot of light, but they don’t, apparently, show any evidence of having advanced. He’s called them “dull of hearing.” So he’s very concerned about that body of believers. They are professing believers. He feels they are true believers, but he’s so concerned that there might be one or two, here or there, who have a lot of knowledge but haven’t come to a genuine reception of Christ as their own personal savior.

Why is he disturbed? Because of the condition, they are dull! They have need that someone teach them, after all of this time. Could it be possible? My brethren and sisters, now, this pertains to us. This very thing! Many of you in this room have been a Christian for a generation or two. Some of you have been a Christian for only a decade or so. But if one of the apostles or if this man were to look at your life would he see clear evidence of your salvation? Or would he be concerned and say, “You’ve made a profession. I’m persuaded about you as a body, Believers Chapel as a body, but some of you, I’m very concerned about. And I want to warn you, you’ve made profession, most of you here, I want to warn you that it is possible to make a profession and apostatize from it. And if you apostatize from it, it’s impossible to renew you again unto repentance.”

This is a most severe and serious warning. And do not think this pertained only to that body of believers. It pertains to us, as well. Every single believing body, I mean, professing body of whom the major are believers, should read this with a great deal of personal spiritual introspection in the sense of looking within and asking, “Am I truly a believer in Christ? Are there the spiritual fruits that clearly indicate that I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ?”

Now, there’s a difficulty that people have with this passage that I think we should face, and that is this, is there ever a time when a man cannot be saved? Are you not saying, Dr. Johnson, there is a time when a man cannot be saved? Yes, I’m saying that. I’m precisely saying that! There is a time when an individual cannot be saved. The impossibility is not in God. He can save, of course, at any time. He has all the power to save. But to save may be contrary to the principles of righteousness, justice, holiness, mercy, grace, that pertain to his being. And so we’re not denying that God can save whom ever he wishes. But it’s very evident from the Bible that there are some that God has determined not to save. In other words, he has expended a great deal of converting power on some of these individuals or let’s say those who are in danger of apostasy. Or let’s say even those who have apostatized. But the grace that has been expended is not effectual grace.

There’s a vast amount of common grace that pertains even to people who are not Christians. God’s common grace governs all of the society on the face of this earth. And with some individuals more grace has been manifested to them. But effectual, distinguishing, converting grace belongs only to believers. Now, I know, you would like to find something from the Bible that would support that, so I’m going to try to give you an illustration. And so in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 in verse 14 through verse 16, we read these words. Now, for those of you who are having trouble finding 2 Chronicles, it’s after 1 Chronicles. [Laughter] Verse 14, chapter 36, listen to what the author writes.

“Moreover all the leaders of the priests and the people transgressed more and more, according to all the abominations of the nations, and defiled the house of the Lord which He had consecrated in Jerusalem. And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His

messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy.”

No remedy! It is possible to so oppose the truth of God, that one reaches the stage of “no remedy.” Now, in the New Testament, we have a similar thing in chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew. The Lord Jesus Christ says these words.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate.”

In chapter 21 in verse 43 of the Gospel of Matthew, we read these words.

“Therefore I say to you, [The Parable of the Land Owner] the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.” [Judicial turning away from the nation, “The kingdom of God will be taken from you.”]

Mark, chapter 4, verses 11 and 12; these are very terrible words, but they are spoken by our Lord.

“And He said to them, ‘To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them.’”

Many years ago, I read an illustration that said a lot of this to me, and it's true to personal experience. Howard Guinness, in one of his books, tells a story of a business friend of his, who bought an alarm clock. “It was, at that time, a highly specialized piece of machinery,” he said, “and with a minimum of encouragement, it sounded its morning greeting three times in rapid succession. It would wake the whole household.” He lived in a house where there were other men who were there. “Quite unnecessarily,” he said. “And pleased, nobody, least of all its owner. The first morning, he leapt out of the bed, trembling, as a result of its piercing ring. This method of rising was no joke, so he decided that he would muffle the clock, so he could rise in time, but avoid a nervous breakdown.” [Laughter] “And the other people in the building were very pleased when he did that. As a result, the tone became more gentle, to the satisfaction of everyone in the house. And, a week later, he came down to breakfast, complaining that the miserable thing had gone off only twice, when he was counting on three of the rings, and that he must have it repaired before he let it before it let him down altogether. “After a lapse of another week or two, he complained that it had gone off only once that morning. And then, days later, he came down late and he said, ‘It has not rung at all.’ If he happens to read this,” Mr. Guinness says, “If he happens to read it, I’m sure he’ll forgive me, for reminding him that the rest of the family heard the clock ring it’s thrice repeated welcome to the day, just as usual. What had happened? Why had he failed to hear such an obvious noise? The experience is common. The sound waves had struck his eardrum and sent the ossicles in motion, but no stimuli had reached the higher brain centers. Possibly, the nerve fibers were tired of receiving the same reply from the brain cells, time after time, when they went to the brain cells, the brain cells said, “Go away. Go away,” until finally he didn’t hear. “He put it in these words. “At first, he would not hear. Now, he could not hear.””

That’s precisely what we have in the word of God. If we do not respond to the word of God, my Christian friend, the time comes when we don’t hear either. Now, if you’ll just go back and look at your reading of the Bible, you will know that that’s true, and that all of us are in danger of falling into that same trap. When I first read the Bible through, I can remember the things that I

learned, the things that were so impressive to me, and I can remember also, years later, in reading the Bible, it made very little impression upon me. As a teacher, I had to read it, but the thrill is something else. And I'm thankful to the Lord God that I have been reading the Bible. I finished, by the way! The Bible, since we started in January. And I want you to know that as a result of praying over the reading of the Bible, I've gotten back some of the joy of reading the word of God and the discovery of the things that are within it.

You see, what Mr. Guinness went on to say was, “That in youth the voice was plain enough, but we wouldn't listen. In manhood, it still sounded within our ears, but without the same clear ring. And it was muffled by other voices, those of science, psychology, philosophy, sociology, politics, skeptical friends, success. Some of the voices were right in themselves, others wrong. But one and all, they were allowed to drown out the eternal voice. Later that voice had become an occasional whisper, but it seemed far away and, apparently, divorced from reality. Finally, it was lost altogether and was not heard again. “The voice had not ceased to sound, but the only part of us that could tune in to hear it, and what it said, our spirit, was dead.” So the author then says that it is possible for individuals to have a great deal of light and then to fall away, never having really grasped eternal salvation and fall away to irremediable loss.

Now, he says, “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.” Impossible to bring them back, after they have gone back! That's the point! It's impossible to renew them to repentance, after they have turned, it's impossible to renew them. That's a serious, serious statement! Why? Well, look at what he says is the reason why. “Since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” Now, it is possible to render that “since” as “while,” but, if it's rendered by “while,” that doesn't add anything. That's an insipid kind of interpretation. It's as he says here, “While they crucify again for themselves the Son of God,” of course, it would be impossible to renew such individuals. That would say nothing. That would mean that this is unnecessary to be said. And so the commentators have looked at it and said, “To take that as

meaning “while” and not giving the reason for the previous statement is a vapid or insipid interpretation.”

I agree with them. This gives the reason; “If they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, because they are crucifying again to themselves the Son of God, and putting Him to an open shame.” In other words, this expresses present tense! It’s not they’ve done it once. It’s they are doing it, present tense. They have active, continuous hostility to the truths that at one time they professed. There are many of these in the history of the Christian church.

When I was growing up, the most prominent liberal was Harry Emerson Fosdick. But Dr. Fosdick was an individual who was well known all over the country; a New York preacher, seemingly gifted preacher, an individual who denied the facts of the Christian faith and everybody knew it. Later on, there was a report that went around. I remember hearing it that Dr. Fosdick had repented of his previous beliefs and he had now become a believer in the word of God. And, later on, I ran across a statement by him in which he said that he did not change any of his viewpoints. He had spoken against the inspiration of the Scriptures, he had spoken against the virgin birth, he had spoken against the atonement, and he said, with reference to the virgin birth and other of the points, “Of course, I do not believe in the virgin birth or in that old fashioned substitutionary doctrine of the atonement and I do not know any intelligent Christian minister who does.” This was after it was said that he had come back to the faith. No, his life was one constant, continuous life opposed to the truth of the word of God.

Now, he gives an illustration in verses 7 and 8, two plots of ground, side-by-side, receiving the same amount of rain or blessing. One is productive, the other is not done, is not productive, so the ground does not bring forth fruit, is fit only for burning because cursed. So the apostates, they are like ground that is totally unproductive. That’s why, when you go to some parts, over the face of this earth, you’ll never find farmers farming certain parts of this earth. It’s been tried. And it’s utterly unproductive to do so. There are plots of ground like that. And this, incidentally, indicates, this is not a reference to believers. No believer is ever near to being cursed. And, incidentally, also,

the fact that this kind of ministry, represented by these blessings up above, and is likened to the rain that has been extended upon the pieces of ground, he says, “the rain often comes upon it, the earth drinks it in, the fact that it receives blessing from God is an indication that this is also regarded as blessing and is the kind of thing that belongs to both saved and unsaved.

Well, the last few verses are a consolation directed to them. We are persuaded for “better things concerning you,” and things that accompany salvation. We are convinced the vast majority of you are not apostates, but we are worried that there might be some. It’s almost as if he, himself, were startled by the severity of his words. But now, he affectionately encourages them. He’s convinced that they are saved, but he wants to be sure of each individual sheep within that body, just like any shepherd should wish to be.

To be sure of every single one, I look out over you, I know, that the vast majority of you are Christians. I know you well enough to know that. But as a shepherd of the flock, I must be concerned about every single individual one of you, as one of God’s teachers of his word. So the terrible nature of apostasy with its double lesson, one may be lost, yet possessing great light. Apostasy is irremediable.

Allow me, just for a moment, to say a few things about a man who I never had any close contact with, of course, because I’m talking about Aaron Burr. When I was at Princeton University, back in the fifties a couple of times, giving lectures on a campus of Princeton. There was a young man in the Christian group, the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship, by the name of Bill Rush. What was remarkable about this man was that he was the, had an opportunity as a senior to become the person who had the finest record of anyone at Princeton University, and it startled me when they said, “Bill has an opportunity, depending upon how he does this semester, of beating Aaron Burr’s record.”

Aaron Burr, at that time, held the record of the finest grades of anyone who ever went through Princeton University. You know the story of Aaron Burr. Later on, he was accused of treason, ended his life in disgrace with a great deal of accomplishments in his life including Vice

President of the United States. When he was a young man, a professor gave him a Bible and said to him, “Go to your room and settle this question.” He was greatly convicted. The professor was a Christian man. “Go to your room with the Bible. Settle the question.” Finally, he said, as he was trying to make the decision, and come to what he felt God would have him do, he cried out to God and said, “God, let me alone and I’ll let you alone.”

Years later, a friend came to Dr. Burr and said, “I’d like for you to see a friend of mine.” Well, Dr. Burr said, “If he’s anything like you, I’d certainly like to see him, because he must be a fine man.” And this man said, “His name is Jesus Christ.” And with that, Aaron Burr told him about his experience and then he said, “From that day to this, I’ve never had one desire to become a Christian.” What a testimony! Or lack of one! It’s so serious for us to be faced with the word of God, and the teaching concerning Christ. May God help us not to fall away.

Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these warnings that are found in this great epistle, for we surely need them. Deliver us, Lord, from apostasy. May our faith grow and may our Lord be honored in our lives.

We pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.