



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapelDallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Philemon 1-25

“The Epistle the Liberals Like to Praise”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are turning to Paul's epistle to Philemon for the Scripture reading today.

Some of you have been in Believer's Chapel a long time, and since I know you go home and largely commit to memory what I say to you each Sunday, you'll probably remember that I have preached on this topic before in Believers Chapel. But his past week I determined I was going to relax for a week and deal with the Epistle to Philemon because it is such a favorite of mine, and it contains some truth that I think that we need constant emphasis upon. So we're turning again to Philemon, and for those of you who heard the last time, I spoke on this topic in Believers Chapel, and I don't remember how many years it was ago. Some of you were little boys at that time. You'll have to hear again what I said then with a few additions here and there. Verse 1 the apostle writes,

“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer, And to our beloved Apphia (probably Philemon's wife), and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house. (And Archippus was probably their son. He in Colossians was referred to as one who ministers the word of God, and so he was a rather important young man in the church in Colossi.) Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; That the communication of thy

faith may become effectual by the acknowledging. (The original text has a noun that means knowledge, and so we'll use knowledge.) By the knowledge of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the. (Now bowels does not have the same sense today that it used to have when this particular version was made, perhaps something like your inmost heart would serve as a proper translation.) Because the inmost heart of the saints (or hearts of the saints) are refreshed by thee, brother. Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is proper. (The Authorized Version from which I am reading has convenient, but again the term has changed slightly in meaning. Proper is a good rendering of the Greek word.) Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such and one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. (And as you can tell the apostle is in prison in Rome as he writes this letter to Philemon.) I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: (The name Onesimus comes from a Greek root seen in the verb *onimi*, which means “to profit” or “to benefit,” and so to paraphrase Onesimus’ name means profitable. So he was Mr. Profitable. And Paul is playing on the sense of the name, which was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.) Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own inmost heart: Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit. (The Greek word is a word commonly used, meaning simply good. “That thy good” that is what Onesimus would be to Paul even though he belongs to Philemon.) That thy should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever; Not now as a servant (slave is really the force). Not now as a slave, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner receive him as me. (The original text is simply *hos emi* “as me,” so that’s very important. In other words, Onesimus is to go back to his master whom he’s left and his master is to look at him as if he were Paul.) If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine

account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: (I think at this point, Paul took the pen from his amanuensis, and he wrote these words in his own hand, so that there would be clear evidence that he has committed himself to paying whatever debt Onesimus might owe to Philemon.) Albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. (Philemon obviously was indebted to the Apostle Paul for his conversion too.) Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my inmost being in the Lord. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. (Now we do not have an evidence of what actually transpired when Onesimus came home with Titicuss and the letter was read to Philemon, but on the grounds of the things that the apostle expresses here, and based upon his knowledge of Philemon, we can be relatively sure that he was welcomed back by Philemon and even though his slave now is received not simply as his slave but as his brother in the Lord, and as a matter of fact Paul says he's confident he will do more than I say. Perhaps he would have given him his freedom, but we do not know the facts.) But withal prepare me also a lodging. (In other words if Philemon has a prophet's chamber get it ready because I hope to come to Colossi. So far as we know Paul, at this time, had never been to Colossi, but he church owed it existence to him because of Epaphras and others who had been touched by the apostle.) But withal prepare me also for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Edemas. (Edemas is called a fellowlaborers here but as you know later on Edemas left the apostle went back to Thessalonica because he loved this present age, but at this point Paul accords him the title of a fellowlaborers.) Lucas, my fellowlaborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

That 24th verse is so interesting to me because he says, Mark, Aristarchus, Edemas, Lucas are with him, so in Rome at the same time in association with the apostle, who wrote thirteen letters approximately in the New Testament, are two men who wrote gospels, and one of those men also wrote the book of Acts. So we have a approximately two thirds of the New Testament represented

by that little group of people associated with the apostle imprisoned in Rome, a truly remarkable little gathering. No doubt they did not realize at that time perhaps the influence that they would have, but when you think of the rather lengthy Gospel of Luke and the lengthier book of Acts or at least as lengthy, and add to that all of the Pauline literature you can see that there is fundamentally a basic unity in the things that are found in the New Testament.

I know that many liberal scholars are not excited over that because they like to find flaws in the New Testament, but there is justification for believing that a great unity exists. As is reflected in this particular situation as well. May the Lord bless this reading of his word, and let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we turn to Thee with the confidence that Thou hast enabled us to obtain through the ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That we belong to Thee that our sins have been paid for. That Thou hast installed us in the family of God as sons and daughters and that being the children of God we have the nature of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit and the new life that suggests the change, the tremendous change that has taken place within us.

And as we reflect, Lord, upon what we were, and what we have become by Thy grace, the greatest expressions of gratitude flow out of our hearts toward heaven toward our triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who have each contributed to the blessings that we enjoy today. The Father, who planned this great plan of redemption, the Son, who executed it, and the Spirit, who has applied the benefits of it to our hearts. Truly Lord we are blessed, and we express to Thee thanksgiving for the forgiveness of sins, for justifications, for righteous that is pleasing to Thee and for the presence of the Holy Spirit as our guide and teacher for the days of our lives upon this earth that remain. Lord, we pray for the whole church of Christ, not simply for ourselves, but for all of that great body our brothers and sisters in the Lord we pray for each one of them, whether weak in the faith or strong we pray for all of them and ask, O God, that together we may be edified and grow

into the likeness of our Lord, and if it please Thee Lord may his coming be soon when we may reach the maturity that Thou hast designed for all of us.

We pray for the sick today. We ask Thy blessing upon each one of them, and especially those who have requested our prayers we pray for them, O God, answer the cries of their hearts, and if it please Thee give healing, and if not give encouragement and consolation in the sense of Thy will being done. We pray for our country, for our president. We pray for the outreach of Believers Chapel, for our elders, for our deacons, for the members for those who have so remarkably supported this work, in appreciation for what Christ has done for them. Bless each one of them. Minister to them and through them to us as well. For this body of people who are here Lord we pray and we ask Thy blessing upon each one and upon their families, upon their children or grandchildren. And we pray that there may be responsiveness on the part of the all of us to the truth of God. Bless now as we listen the exposition of the word of God. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today, and that's primarily the thing that's different from the last time I preached this some years ago here in the chapel, is “The Epistle the Liberals Like to Praise.” And the reason I have chosen that title is simply this that this little epistle is praised by almost everyone of a religious bent who reads it for the simple reason that it is a remarkable personal letter on the part of the apostle, and I suggest also perhaps one of the reasons is too is that on the surface of it there appears to be so little distinctively Christian doctrine set forth. For example, the skeptic Renon has called it, “a true little masterpiece of letter-writing.” Sabatier said, “It shines among the rich treasures of the New Testament as a pearl of exquisite fineness.” It could be called a *schrift durfur*, that is a masterpiece of letter writing. And it is essentially that.

It would be interesting only if it's the only private letter of the apostle, and I say it's private even though there is one point in it that suggests that even he may have realized that it would be read by others, and whether Paul understood that we would be reading it in Dallas or not, I am sure most of us would agree he would not have knowledge of that, but he knew that whatever he wrote to

Colossi in a letter such as this to one of the important individuals in that church would probably be read in the assembly of the believers as they met round the Lord's table, which they did every Sunday, and so at the end of the epistle in verse 25, he writes, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” And the pronoun “your” is in the plural in the original text, and so what he says is the grace of he Lord Jesus be with the spirit of you plural. So the apostle may have recognized that others would read the letter, but essentially it's a private letter. It contains some ethical material that is of significance, and particularly with reference to the question of slavery its not only the only place in the New Testament in which the subject is broached, but it does have some significant things to say about the topic and underneath there is as I am going to try to show underneath there is a doctrinal fabric that supports the letter.

This past week I read perhaps the leading mildly evangelical commentary on this epistle that has been written in recent years, and it was remarkable to me that the entire letter was expounded without any real doctrinal material, any real theological material at all. The author evidentially either did not see anything within it that was of doctrinal significance or did not think it was very important. Some dislike this epistle as they dislike almost all of Paul's letters because within them there is evidence for a vicarious atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. And basically men have called the apostle a kind of professional theologian, who instead of simplifying things, have turned the simple teaching of the gospels and the teaching of the Lord Jesus into professional theology and the apostle is to be blamed for that reason.

One of the men who has done this, and a very prominent man in our country was the third president of the United States President Thomas Jefferson. After Jefferson had spent his eight years in office he wrote a number of letters and among them are these two letters, and these will give you some idea of the spiritual beliefs of Thomas Jefferson. The fact that he was a deist is not reflected here, but that is the general term that is applied to him, but something worse than that by far is found in these letters. One that he wrote to a man by the name of Van Der Kemp reads this way. “The genuine and simple religion of Jesus will one day be restored such as it was preached and practiced by

himself. Very soon after his death it became muffled up in mysteries and has been ever since kept in concealment from the vulgar eye.” He means vulgar in the old sense of common, the common eye, and when he says concluded he means concealed in the literature of the New Testament. Not concealed outside of the Bible.

Then to another man a man by the name of Short he writes these words. “It is not to be understood that I am with him.” That is with Jesus Christ. “In all his doctrines. I am a materialist.” He takes the side of spiritualism. He preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin. I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it.” As you can see, he was a believer in salvation by good works, which is the fundamental plank of those who do not believe the scriptural revelation. Going all the way back to Abraham believed in the Lord and it was accounted for him to righteousness through the just shall live by faith of Habakkuk on into the New Testament. If there is one thing the Bible sets forth it is that men are not saved by works. They are saved by the grace of God as manifested in the work of Jesus Christ, but he goes on to say, “Among the sayings and discourses imputed to him,” That is Jesus Christ. “by his biographers,” Those are the gospel writers. “I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality.” Think of it. Thomas Jefferson evaluating the morality of the apostles of the New Testament. He finds some that they wrote was pretty good. “A correct morality and of the most lovely benevolence. And others again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, so much charlatanism, and in posture as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being. I separate therefore the gold from the dross, restored to him,” that is to Christ. “The former and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, the roguery of others of his disciples. Of this band of dupes and imposters Paul was the great Carifius.

Now you know that term Carifius means something like the individual who leads the band. Like when you look at Channel 13, and you see the Boston Pops, it's the man whose leading that orchestra who is the Carifius, so the great Carifius is the Apostle Paul and he finishes by saying, “the first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.” So this is the third president of United States, so

administered by so many in this country, but Jefferson as you can see was anything but an evangelical Christian. So he’s just one of the many who have rejected the vicarious atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ and salvation by the grace of God.

When I was just a young Christian I read the life of Hudson Taylor the great missionary to China, the founder of the China inland mission, and the finest and largest of the evangelical missions. Now the oriental crusade I believe is the name of it at this moment, but it was a magnificent agency and incidentally they never appeal for funds. They look to the Lord for the supply of their funds and God blessed that great organization. Mr. Taylor describes his conversion. It’s a remarkable conversion, and describes it by referring to the stanzas of a poem as being expressive of what he had come to understand. He was saved by the realization that the Lord Jesus had done a finished work on Calvary’s cross, and to support it, he cited the stanzas of this poem. “Nothing either great or small, nothing sin or no, Jesus did it, did it all long, long ago. It is finished yes, indeed. Finished every jot. Sinner, this is all you need. Tell me is it not? Cast your deadly doing down, down at Jesus’ feet. Stand in him in him alone gloriously complete.”

J .A. Froude one of the most important historians of a generation or so past said with reference to this particular poem that it is immoral, and what he meant by that was that the idea of being justified before God by no works of our, but by the works of Jesus Christ his work on the cross, was immoral. The greatest answer to Professor Froude was the life of Hudson Taylor, and if anything demonstrates the fact that salvation through the grace of God and the transformed life that issues from that leads to a life that glorifies God and blesses men, it was the conversion of J. Hudson Taylor, whose life literally left thousands of Chinese as well as others in the United States and Great Britain all over the Western world.

Well let me go back to the setting of this letter. This is set within the Roman Empire of course in the day of the Apostle Paul and we have to remember that it has been estimated by, for example Gibbon I believe, that there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire, and so it’s not surprising to run across stanzas in the New Testament dealing with slavery and Christianity. I

am not going to say anything about that except to this that it seems to be very plain that what the apostle, perhaps only dimly realized but at least anticipated in his writings is that the truth of Christianity would ultimately be the death of slavery as such, but at any rate, it was the age of slavery and many, many of them in the Roman Empire, I think the price of them has been estimated at three shillings, which would not be much money. If you wanted to have twenty thousand slaves, it wouldn't require a whole lot of money to have twenty thousand slaves.

There are so many stories, I don't where to start, and where to stop, but one that has been cited a number of times is the story of one of Augustus' friends by the name of Videous Paleo and Videous Paleo had a huge place, a pool of conger eels, man eating eels, and one day one of his servants while the emperor was there was serving them and broke a piece of the crystal of Mr. Paleo, and he immediately assigned him to the pool of conger eels. The slave cried out and asked for mercy, not that he might live, but that he might be executed in another way rather than being thrown in the pool and eaten by the conger eels, and the emperor was impressed enough to do something about it, but so far as he did persuade Paleo not to execute him that way but the friendship between the emperor and Videous Paleo was not affected at all by what happened. As a matter of fact Augustus himself is supposed to have had slain one of his own because of something just as terrible as that. I think someone killed his favorite quail and as a result of the he had him put to death. So we are talking about a time when slavery was very common and it's obvious that Onesimus belonged to Philemon and was the slave of that Colossian Christian. Runaway slaves particularly were punished. In fact in certain parts of the Roman Empire it's very evident from the laws that we have knowledge of that if a slave ran away he was subject to death and they were called *fugatevas*, which is a Latin, term that means a fugitive, so he was a fugitive, and therefore he was subject to death.

Now Onesimus may have stolen something from Philemon. We are not sure. Paul says in verse 18, “If he hath wronged thee or oweth Thee anything put that on mine account.” And so evidentially it must have been at least in Paul's mind that Onesimus had been accused of stealing something, and perhaps his conversion occurred something like this. It has been suggested that he

move from Colossi to Epaphras, which would have been natural, and there Epaphras had a church that was very active and some of the individuals who are referred to here were very knowledgeable, known to be knowledgeable Christians in that church. And it has been suggested that perhaps Onesimus ran into Paul there. But at any rate since Paul is in Rome I am going to suggest another way by which Onesimus came to the knowledge of the Lord. If it is true that he stole something or at least was accused of it and felt he might not win acquittal from his master he fled. And the place to which he would no doubt want to go would be the vast city of Rome, because a slave could be lost in Rome. You know the ancient saying, “All roads lead to Rome.” And so in this instance he ultimately found his way to the city of Rome.

Now how he came into touch with the apostle we don't know, but there are some indications in the letter that Epaphras was there of course and some others, and since Epaphras was well known in Colossi and knew also Philemon. They belonged to the same church. You can see that it's possible that as Philemon was walking the streets of Rome and Epaphras was there too he was surprised one day to look over and see Onesimus, and he went over, talked to him and persuaded him to accompany him to the Apostle Paul, and through the fellowship with Epaphras and through the fellowship with the Apostle Paul. It's an interesting story isn't it? He found the Lord. We know he found the Lord because Paul says he has begotten him in his bonds. So he brought him to Paul when he was in prison, and Onesimus found the Lord, made confession of the situation, and found Jesus Christ. And now here as Philemon is written by the Apostle Paul, no doubt this epistle was carried with the epistle to Colossi by Titicus another disciple, and the three of them make their journey back to the city of Colossi and to Philemon himself with the letter, and if you remember in ancient times they read out loud.

You often see people today still who do that, watch their lips, and they'll be reading, but in ancient times they almost had to do that because the letters followed one after another without any word distinctions, for example if you look at a manuscript of the New Testament you will note that all of the letters follow one right after another, no space between the words, so you have to read very

carefully and it's very helpful to read out loud if that's the kind of thing you are reading, and so this would have been read out loud, and just to read it that way what I would like to now is just to read through the letter and we'll have the situation before us.

The letter is being read by Philemon, and it's been handed to him by Epaphras and read by Philemon, and Onesimus is standing by and listening as Philemon reads the epistle that Paul addressed to him, so we'll comment on it once or twice on the viewpoints of the two, and then talk about something that I think is rather important. The first seven verses are a kind of introduction and an appreciation by Paul of Philemon and others.

“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ and Timothy our brother unto Philemon our dearly beloved and fellowlaborer and to our beloved Apphia and Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church in thy house. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God making mention of Thee always in my prayers hearing of Thy love in faith which Thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints that the communion or communication or the fellowship of Thy faith may become effectual of the knowledge of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus for we have great joy and consolation in Thy love because the in most being of the saints are refreshed by Thee brother.”

Isn't it interesting that first of all in verse 2 he says, “The church in Thy house.” Now we're not accustomed to thinking of a church being inside our house. And so we read this and we are puzzled by it if we have the common idea about churches today. The common idea is you go down the street and you see a building and you say that's the church. That's the church of Christ or that's the First Baptist Church or that's the First Presbyterian Church and you are talking about the brick and the stones and mortar, and if you look at Believers Chapel outside you say, “That's Believers Chapel.” And you are talking about the brick and the stones and mortar and the leak in the room, which we have in the back or have had in the back, and the church is the building. But if you study

the New Testament of course you discover the church is a body of people. It's not a building at all. This building is the place where the church meets, and the Christians in New England in the earlier days of the United States knew that very well, and so they called their churches meeting houses, and there are still many up there that are still called meeting houses, even though people don't perhaps realize why they are called that. So the church is an assembly of faithful men and women and it's not anything else.

You cannot see how Mr. Spurgeon says such a piece of architecture as we now call a church could very well have been in Philemon house. “It must have been a large house if it had such a thing as church in it for an ornament.” He said. But he was trying to make the point of course that the church is a body of people. This is not the church. This is not Believers Chapel. This is the place where Believers Chapel the church meets. And Paul makes reference to that there, and I can imagine of course as this thing is being read that when he gets down to verse 7 here, and talks about your faith's generous sharing, by this time Philemon is beginning to grasp, since Onesimus is standing right here, the slave that has offended him. He's beginning to realize that perhaps Paul is seeking to influence him so he might be saying to himself, “Boy that Paul sure knows how to solve soapman, but this guy standing here is crook. He left stealing something from me.” And Paul's honey is not going to help Onesimus, Philemon might have said at that point. But with verse 8 Paul begins his advocacy of Onesimus and this is the heart of the epistle.

And notice what he says. He says in verse 8, “Wherefore though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee which is proper yet for love's sake, I rather beseech thee being such in one as Paul the aged.” Philemon to himself, calling himself a senior citizen, what oily palaver, appealing to my sympathy, and Onesimus standing by thinking the letter is really a letter for his benefit, and he hasn't even been mentioned to this point is saying, “Why doesn't he mention me because his life may be on the line?” And so Paul continues, “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus whom I have begotten in my bonds. I was the instrumentality of his conversion while in prison, which in time passed was

to thee unprofitable, but now is profitable to thee and to me.” And I can hear Onesimus, “Sure glad he finally got around to mentioning me and saying that I am profitable now.”

And Paul goes on to say about Mr. Profitable, “Whom I have sent back thou therefore receive him that is my own inmost being.”

James Denny used to say, “Christianity is the power which makes bad men good.” And that worked in the case of Onesimus. He goes on and says in verse 13,

“Whom I have retained with me that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel, but without thy mind would I do nothing that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season that Thou shouldst receive him forever.”

In other words, whatever he’s done perhaps it happened in order, Philemon, that when you get your slave back he might be a different kind of man and one attached to you with bonds that were deeper than any kind of bond of political slavery, or social slavery. Verse 16: “Not now as a servant but above a servant a brother beloved especially to me but how much more unto thee both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

Now in verse 17. Before I read this, I would like to suggest that this relationship between Onesimus and Philemon and Paul may be likened to the relationship that you and I have to the Father and to Jesus Christ and the gospel. For example, let’s think of Paul as being the mediator, like Jesus Christ. Let’s think of Philemon, for Paul is making an appeal to him, because of the requirements that Philemon has for the obedience of his slaves, so let’s think of Philemon as the Father in heaven and then we look at Onesimus, and we think of ourselves because Onesimus illustrates you and me in at least four ways. So far as we know he was born a slave. And we are born in slavery to sin under guilt and condemnation as a result of Adam’s sin. And secondly we have become transgressors, just as Onesimus had become in specific acts of rebellion against God. We

are just as Onesimus unable to pay our debts. Paul makes the point in Romans chapter 5. Fully there is no need to turn there. We cannot pay our debt. For we are sinners and our debt is infinite and we cannot pay any infinite debt. And also just as our sin means that we are destined for death, “For the wages of sin is death. The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” So Onesimus is destined for death.

Luther, who understood something more than our modern theologians understood realized that here we have something that is at least an illustration of the gospel of Christ. Luther makes these comments in the introduction to the Epistle to Philemon in one of his earlier translations of the New Testament. He says, “This epistle showeth a right noble lovely example of Christian love. Here we see how Saint Paul layeth himself out for poor Onesimus and with all his means pleadeth his cause with his master and so saideth himself as if he were Onesimus and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Yet this he doeth not with force nor constraint as if he had full right, neigh he putteth himself out of his rights, whereby he constraineth Philemon to perceive that he must also strip himself of his rights.” Now these are the words that are important. “Even as Christ did for us with God the Father thus also doeth Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ also hath put himself out of his rights, and with love and humbleness hath prevailed with his Father that he should lay aside his wrath and his rights, and receive us to grace for Christ’s sake show so earnestly intercedeth for us and layeth himself out so tenderly for us.” and then these words often cited by Luther. “For we are all his” that is, God’s “Onesimi if we believe it.” It seems to me that as we read this we couldn’t help but think of the gospel of Christ.

Now I remind you of something that’s important. There are three great imputations in the Bible. There is the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity. All of us abide under guilt and condemnation the moment that we are conceived and born. We are under guilt and condemnation. We are born in sin because Adam was our representative, and Adam representing us failed. You don’t like that do you? I love it. Do you know why? Because someone else can represent me. God deals with us by the principle of representation. And so Adam is my covenantal head and he fails,

but Christ is my covenantal head and he wins the victory. So I love representation. But at any rate that's one imputation.

The second imputation is the imputation of human, that is the elect's sin to the Lord Jesus Christ. So when on the cross at Calvary, he cries out, “My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?” he acts as Paul explains in Romans 5 as the mediator for the people of God. And he as their mediator pays the penalty for their sins efficaciously. Not potentially, not conditionally, but efficaciously. Read through the New Testament. Show me one place where the atoning work of Christ is supposed to be potential or conditional. It's always presented efficaciously, sovereignly, efficaciously, so he dies.

And the third imputation is God's imputation of God's righteousness to his elect people as they are brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As we sing, “Jesus Thy blood and righteousness, my beauty are my glorious dress mid flaming worlds in these arrayed with joy shall I lift up my head. My righteous, my righteousness by the grace of God through what Christ has done for me.”

Paul says, in verse 18, “If he hath wronged thee or oweth thee for anything put that on mine account. He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it.” So the proverb says. “The Lord Jesus is surety for his people. He samplers for it by dying on Calvary's cross.” And his death as we read in the New Testament is a death for our benefit. So Paul writes, “Put that on mine account.”

Last year, I have forgotten exactly when, I think it was sometime in the summertime. I gave a series of five messages on the evangelical mega shift. And pointed to Robert Brow and Anglican Canadian ministers article in *Christianity Today* in which he attacked the doctrine of justification by grace through faith claiming that the forensic doctrine of justification by faith, as if we stood in a law court and God has pronounced our acquittal, that that was something derived from the Romans and that we should think rather of a family relationship.

Now of course it shouldn't be either-or, but Mr. Brow would like to have it only the family relationship. And we went back to the book of Genesis in chapter 15, and tried to show that the

doctrine of justification by grace through faith inundated the Romans by centuries, that God deals with us legally forensically by Christ paying our debt fully and completely.

Now of course the personal aspect is there too because we have the doctrine of regeneration. We are born again given new life. We become children of God sons in the family of God. Why our sins are forgiven all of those figures and realities are true. The personal is there, but the legal is also there. And so when Paul says, “Put that on mine account.” That’s a legal statement is it not? Put it on my account, just as if I were to have a debt on one of the stores in this town let us say Neiman Marcus, and I should go because I don’t have money to pay, I should go upstairs to the cashier or the business office ready to confess my sin of being unable to pay the debt, and as I stand before the individual behind the counter and tell my sad story. The individual said, “What’s your name?” and I say, “S. L. Johnson.” And he looks down the line of all the Johnson’s, some important some unimportant, and finally gets to my name and looks at it, and he says, “Yes, you did by such and such, and such. You did receive a bill from us, but we’d like to let you know that your bill has been paid.” “Paid?” “Yes, it’s been paid.” “Who paid it?” “Well we are not free to tell you. One of your friends has paid your debt. You are free.”

No need to follow that. I don’t have any bills at Neiman’s. Any of you who are just anxious to write out a check in my behalf, no I don’t have that. So he would look at this account, and he’s say, “Look. On your account it’s fully paid.” Paul says, “Put that on mine account.” Philemon I have an account with you. You owe your life to me. I was the instrumentality of your conversion as well. Put that on my account, and then he says, “I will repay it.”

Now, I wish I had time to talk about this. I don’t have time to talk about it. It’s too vast a subject. I’d just like to say this. It’s obvious that what Paul is talking about is the truth of substitutionary satisfaction. I will repay it. Substitution, if we talk about a substitutionary atonement, we are limited as I have said to you more than once, we are limited to two things. We are limited to universalism. If Christ died for the sins of every single individual that has ever breathed upon the face of this earth. We are not talking about the sufficiency. Christ death is sufficient for the sins of

every single individual. We are talking about the intent of it, the purpose of it, the goal of his work, and the goal of the Father in the work. If we affirm that he came to die for everyone, and did do that efficaciously as atonement is always presented in the New Testament, then we are shut up to universalism on the one hand, and that is the way in which most of the leading denominations are going at the present time. Some having already arrived there telling us that everybody ultimately will be saved, and even some evangelicals. Or particularism, that is that the death of Jesus Christ is for his people.

Now if you were to say to me, “Well I believe it’s for everybody, but we have to believe.” In other words Christ death is absolutely insufficient to save anyone unless you do your part. That is dishonoring to our Lord. That’s dishonoring to the greatness of his sacrifice. Now if you were to say, “Oh, but my faith is a gift of God.” Well I am happy that you are that close because it surely would be a gift of God if you have faith in Christ, but then I simply say to you, evidently he died for people that he could not save, or put it this way. He died for people. He intended to save everyone, but not everyone is saved. In other words the Godhead is frustrated in its aims and purposes.

Now I suggest to you, my Christian friend, that we are talking about two different viewpoints of God. That is an unfrustratable deity, a truly sovereign deity. And we can talk about the sovereignty of God. Or we are talking about a God who is partially sovereign, and can do a great deal, but cannot complete his intent in the case of those for whom Christ died. It’s something for you to think about. You know of course where I would stand in such a decision as that. I cannot believe anything other than that what intends to do he accomplishes. That is stated in the word of God over, and over and over again. What he intends to do he accomplishes, and to suggest that he intended to, to something and was unable to unaccomplished it, is to my mind as I say stealing from the honor and glory of our great sovereign God. So when Paul says, “I will repay it.” He’s talking about in the figure of the ultimate substitutionary satisfaction that Jesus Christ rendered.

Universalism is repudiated. As a matter of fact, Satan sought to, in the first of the chapters about man’s sin, sought to talk about universalism because in Genesis chapter 3, in verse 4, you remember

that the serpent said, “You shall not surely die.” Satan himself is the first universalist. If you sin you shall not surely die.

I’ve cited this before, and I have cited it recently, but it fits in here I think very well. I mentioned the epistle to Diognetus, a 2nd century epistle. A noble early Christian apology, and the words, “For what else but his righteousness would have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us lawless and ungodly men to have been justified save only in the Son of God? Oh, the sweet exchange. Oh, the inscrutable creation. Oh, the unexpected benefits that the iniquity of the many should be concealed in the one righteous man, and the righteousness of the one should justify men that are iniquitous.”

Many years ago Socrates said, “Plato, Plato, perhaps God can forgive deliberate sin, but I don’t see how.” The Apostle John gives the answer. The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses from all sin. And John the Baptist himself, as he saw our Lord, “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.” The world of Gentiles as well as Jews, the world of all kinds of men, universal in the sense of without distinction, not without exception. “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, whether Jew or Gentile.” And the offer of the gospel goes freely to all, all in this auditorium, the offer goes out, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. We never know who belongs to God’s elect until the decision is made.

May God in his grace so touch your heart. May you recognize if you do not know, surely the forgiveness of sins that forgiveness is available for you as you acknowledge before the Lord within your heart that you are a sinner, that the wages of sin is death, that you are headed for a Christless eternity. Acknowledge that to God, and receive as a free gift offered to all the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. May God in his grace so touch your heart that you make that decision? Don’t leave this auditorium until it is made. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father we are so grateful to Thee for the ministry of the word of God, and we are so thankful we have a sovereign God. We are so thankful that there is nothing too hard for Thee, that

“The Epistle the Liberals Like to Praise” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2008 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

the things that Thou has purposed to do Thou wilt do. We thank Thee for the saving work of Jesus Christ. We know how much it cost for one soul to be saved, an infinite sacrifice. A sacrifice of infinite value, sufficient for all, but destined for the people of God. O God, if there are some here who have never believed, O touch their hearts now. Do not allow them to leave this auditorium Lord until they leave in Christ. We ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.