



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Hebrews 10:32-39

“The Peril of Drawing Back”

TRANSCRIPT

We are studying the Epistle to the Hebrews and tonight our message is Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 32 through 39, and we ask that you turn there and then we'll open with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we turn with thanksgiving to Thee for the word of God and for the way in which it has been an enlightening experience for us to become acquainted with the one of whom it speaks, primarily and preeminently, our Lord Jesus Christ. And we thank Thee for the way in which the Scriptures have been our guide down through the years of our relationship with Thee. We thank Thee for a great High Priest, of whom we have been studying in this epistle, and we thank Thee for the invitations to come boldly to the throne of grace, to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus and experience what it means to have the presence of God with us in a most wonderful way throughout all of the days and hours and minutes of our experiences. We pray again, Lord, that the Holy Spirit may be our teacher and that for each of us it may be a most profitable time for us to read and ponder the things that the author of this great epistle has been saying to us. We commit our evening meeting now to Thee.

In our Savior's name. Amen.

[Message] One of Scripture’s most arresting statements is a statement that James said. He said, “Ye have heard of the patience of Job.” Isn’t that striking? He doesn’t expound the patience of Job; he assumes that everybody knows of the patience of Job. “You have heard of the patience of Job.” In fact, in one sense, that probably is a one-sentence summary of the life of Job or thirty pages in your Bible. And the lesson of the life of Job is that blessing often comes to us through suffering. Or, as William Cooper put it, Cowper, we Americans like to call him, but the Scots called him Cooper, “Behind a frowning providence, God hides a smiling face.”

Now, the readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews evidently needed this lesson because their hardships were in danger of shaking the stability of their faith. We know that because just a few verses up in chapter 10 in verse 25, the author wrote to them, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” And so the experiences that they were suffering, the hardships, were perhaps the reasons that these individuals were beginning to abandon the meetings of the churches. And so the author speaks of them as some of them, not all of them, some of them needing a word of exhortation to not forsake the assembling of themselves together.

They faced some very important dangers. They faced, first of all, the danger of and the temptation to apostasy. In chapter 10 in verse 26 through verse 31, our lesson last week, we had a very vivid paragraph in which the author talks about sinning willfully, after we have received the knowledge of the truth, and warns us that there is no more sacrifice for sins under those circumstances.

This, of course, is for the few, the danger to apostasy. He’s quite sure that the great majority of his readers are not apostates. He says that back in chapter 6. And he will say that here, again, in chapter 10 in verse 39, expressing his confidence in those to whom he is writing. But, nevertheless, in a meeting such as this and in an audience such

as the epistle addressed, it's always necessary to remind us that apostasy is the apostasy, it is departure from the faith by those who have been professing faith, who ordinarily have been meeting with the saints and whose true spiritual condition is not really known by the others. We may surmise the spiritual condition of our friends, who meet with us regularly, but the ultimate condition of them we do not know. Oh, we may have some real assurance concerning some, whose faithfulness is so manifest in their own lives and in their service of the saints.

But there are others who attend our meetings of whom we do not know enough, ourselves, to be absolutely certain. So every Bible teacher, every teacher of the word of God is justified in my opinion, in stirring us up, all of us, every breathing body in the auditorium, to ask ourselves the questions, “Are we really one of those for whom Christ died?” So that's for one of the dangers. And it's for the few. But for all of us who are Christians, the second danger is our tendency to backslide; our tendency to become dull of hearing, spiritually. The tendency to not keep close relationships with the Lord in our daily life; the abandonment of prayer, the abandonment of the reading of the Scriptures, the abandonment of the fellowship of the saints, and the encouragement that they give to us. Now, this is something for the majority.

You may remember that Matthew in his account of the parable of the soils, often called the parable of the sower, but there is a sense in which one could call it the parable of the soils, has some things to say with reference to these facts. In Matthew chapter 13, verse 3 through verse 8, our Lord tells the parable.

“Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them.

Others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

It’s interesting to ponder this because it represents the sowing of the word of God by first our Lord, of course, and then by all who seek to set forth the word of God to others. “Some fell on stony ground.” One commentator says you will notice that it went in but not down; that is the seed. And then some fell by the wayside, on but not in, some fell among thorns, down but did not come up. And then in the 8th verse, “others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” And there, of course, the seed did all of these things, but it was in good ground and in good ground fruit resulted.

So what we’re going to look at tonight is the value of endurance and the need of it in the Christian faith. And let me read, now, the verses beginning with verse 32 through the remainder of the chapter, verse 39.

Our author writes, and remember, I’m reading from the New King James Version, in case you find things slightly different in your version.

“But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: Partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, [That word also is translated in this epistle, boldness. It has both senses.] your confidence [or boldness] which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: “For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws

back, My soul has no pleasure in him.” But we [This is a very comforting thing.] But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.”

Now, the encouragement that he wants to give them is the same kind of encouragement that the author offered in the 6th chapter. You can see how this is very much upon his heart; the encouragement of believers who have been suffering for their faith. Back in chapter 6 in verse 10, he wrote to them, “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, you’ll notice, verse 32, reminds one of that, “But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings.” And then in verse 12 of chapter 6, he said, “[But] do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” And in chapter 10, verse 36, he says, “For you have need of endurance, so that having done the will of God, you may receive the promise.”

So the experiences of the authors are the experience of many of us who are Christians. We have become Christians and we have had trials. The trials that we have had in the United States are not the trials that others have had. If you go to many places over the face of this globe at this very moment there are Christians whose lives are in danger simply because they are Christians. In our case, our lives are not in danger. No one has yet gotten so mad at us that he’s willing to kill us for our faith in this country. Well, maybe willing, but they have not done it. In our case, it’s the scorn and the ridicule of those who know us; who think our position with regard to the Christian faith is not only wrong but ridiculous. One of our great enemies today is our government; not, of course, by design, but just by the simple fact that our government is characterized by unbelief. And so, consequently, the facts of the Christian faith are more and more being lost to the people of the United States of America. I don’t have to go into that. If you

read the newspapers, you know that. If you are a Christian, you know that the things that the Bible speaks about are no longer the things that the body of our nation believes and our politicians generally follow the thinking of our people. And we have seen it.

We have a president who does not realize that the Scriptures are the word of God and that they in the word of God speak very plainly about some things which are issues that he wants to bring to the United States of America as a nation as a whole.

Homosexuality, I mention that only one thing for the simple reason that that is plain and clear from the word of God, that that is something that is displeasing to the Lord God in Heaven.

So our author is dealing with people who have much greater trials than we have. We may consider that a great trial and we think that's a great danger for this country and surely is a great danger for the faith in this country. But so far as our personal experience is concerned, at this point our experiences are nothing like these lovely believers of the Epistle to the Hebrews. What they needed, he felt, was assurance and encouragement and that is what he wants to give them.

There are three sources of assurance from the standpoint of the word of God: the external assurance, the external source of assurance is the fundamental source of assurance and that's the word of God. The word of God and what it says about Jesus Christ and what it says about eternal life as the possession of those who believe -- that's our first and foremost ground of assurance, what the Bible says. That's really sufficient for us, if we truly understand the Bible and truly understand what it says about divine assurance.

But there are other reasonable sources of assurance, too. There is the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, which is the possession of every true believer in Christ. And every true believer in Christ if he honestly, earnestly seeks for God's word to him concerning assurance will find the Holy Spirit pointing to the word of God for him and giving him a sense that he belongs to the Lord. He may be suffering, he may even be in

a period of doubt, but the Holy Spirit is constantly working in the hearts of his saints to bring us to the assurance that we belong to him. Well, that’s encouraging to us and strengthening to us, to have the sense of assurance.

And, I think, it’s fair, also, as the Scriptures at least seem to me to say, that there is a third source of assurance and that third source of assurance is the evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the saints, as is witnessed in their lives and when we see, as we look at various believers, and as we look at our own lives, when we see the evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in the outward life that we live and that they live, that further confirms what the word of God says to us. But, fundamentally, it’s the word of God.

The Puritans used to like to say, “Faith of adherence comes by hearing, but faith of assurance, not without doing.” Perhaps, that’s a little too strong. I’m not sure, really, that that is correct. But, at least, it’s something to think about and I do think in the New Testament we have stress upon the fact that it’s important for us to do the things that we say that we believe.

“The Lord’s sheep,” someone has said, “have two marks.” And in John chapter 10 in verse 27, our Lord speaks about those two marks, at least according to this particular viewpoint, when he says, “My sheep hear My voice and I know them, and they follow me.” The two marks are a mark on the ear; they hear him. By virtue of the presence of the Holy Spirit within their hearts, they hear him. When we read the Bible, we hear the voice of God. Believers! They hear the word of God in a way different from unbelievers. “My sheep hear My voice.” There is something that speaks to true believers that says, “It’s the Holy Spirit. This is the voice of God.” Is that so? Isn’t that so? Three people think it’s so. That’s not an official poll, incidentally. We get those from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. But, one mark is the mark on the ear, the other is the mark on the foot. “They follow Me.” “My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me.” The two

marks, the mark on the ear, mark on the feet. Those who truly believe in our Lord, usually manifest it in the lives that they live.

Now, after having spoken here, in verse 32 through 34, about the evidence of endurance in their past life, the author, in verse 35 through verse 38 admonishes them regarding endurance in the present. Remember the great principle he has been telling us that perseverance in the faith is evidence of the reality of our faith. He’s been talking about that. He says in verse 35, “Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.” Now, that’s the word that is translated “boldness” upon occasion. In fact, back in chapter 10 in verse 19, in my text, we read, “Therefore brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus.” That is the same word, translated here in my version as confidence. So let’s render it boldness.

Verse 35, “Therefore do not cast away your boldness,” which has great reward. Boldness to enter the presence of the Lord. Boldness to have that relationship with the Lord that is personal and remarkable. Boldness, by which we enter his presence; that gives us strength for perseverance. It’s the one who is experiencing the presence of the Lord, our great High Priest, in his personal life who is the one who has strength for perseverance. And this is something that is ours, that is ours by the blood of Christ, he said in verse 19.

John Milton used to say that, “The greatness and sacredness of man’s soul is attested by two facts: first, the creation of the soul in the likeness or in the image of the eternal God and second the price that has been paid for the redemption of his soul, the precious blood of Jesus Christ.” It is important that we remember that. We are individuals created in the image of God, but for those of us who know our Lord, we know that he has come and offered a sacrifice of himself, his precious blood, for us. What more ground for the sense of the greatness of the human believing soul and of the importance of its nurture in divine things.

Now, he says, in verse 36, “For,” he’s going to explain why he said that, he says, “do not cast away your boldness, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.” Now, many of us have seen Christians, for many years, I look out over here and I know some of you in this audience, this may surprise you, but I’ve known some of you for over fifty years. And you have known me, that is, those that I have known, over fifty years. That’s a long time. Fifty years! Most of you in the audience are not even fifty years old. But, I have known you that long. And, here is the author saying, you have need of endurance. And we know that we still have need of endurance, even though we have been in fellowship with the Lord for over fifty years, in my case over fifty years, I know I still need this. I have need of endurance that after having done the will of God, I might receive that promise.

There are four steps, incidentally, to this promise, in my mind. First of all, when he says here, “You have need of endurance, so that after having done the will of God.” How could you possibly do the will of God if you do not know the will of God? In other words, the very first fundamental foundation for doing the will of God is knowing the will of God; unless we are talking about accidentally. Is there such a thing in the Lord’s word? But accidentally doing, the Lord’s will. It’s obvious that the very first thing that Christians need to know is, “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not,” lest the Philistines hear biblical doctrine. That’s right! Biblical doctrine. It’s fundamental that we know biblical doctrine in order to know the will of God. I’m not going to labor that point. I’ve labored it for fifty years. And if we haven’t got it yet, I don’t have any hope that you will because the Holy Spirit’s been seeking to make that point with you for a long, long time, that you will have a happier Christian life if you learn Christian theology, Christian doctrine. But that’s the first principle for doing the will of God; knowing his will. And we learn that from the will of God.

The next step for the fulfillment of the need of patience, he refers to here, is the doing of that will; that is, believing in the Messiah. Resting in him, worshipping him, coming to him boldly, as our author has been exhorting us, in the morning, in the day time, in the evening, in the experiences of life, the quiet times of your life. Take advantage of what it means to have the open door into the presence of the Lord God. Let me read it again: “Therefore brethren,” and sisters, “having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of the faith.”

Now, the third thing is persevering in his will, through trials. All of us have trials. Some of us have more than others. I don't want to have more than you; I would like to have less than you. But some of you have had some trials that I have not had. The third step in acquiring patience is to persevere in his will through trials.

The writer of the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter 5, in a famous passage says, in verse 3 and verse 4, “And not only that, but we glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance character; and character, hope.” Tribulations produce perseverance.

There's an old story that Bible teachers love to tell and it's traced to Robert Chapman, a well-known teacher of the word of God among the Christian brethren. He had a young man approach him, a very impatient young man, who wants to ask him to pray for him, that he might learn patience. And he was rather surprised, so we are told, that Mr. Chapman said, “Well, let us pray.” And he prayed, “Lord, give this young man tribulation.” And after the prayer was over, the young man postulated with him and Mr. Chapman said, “But its tribulation that worketh patience.” So Paul said. So he prayed for tribulation. Well, I would like for my patience to come without all of that tribulation. Wouldn't you? But sometimes it must come through the things that we suffer. That's the third thing on the way to patience.

Henry Ward Beecher one day saw a little boy standing by an old horse that was lank and lean, and Mr. Beecher asked the little boy, “Can your horse run fast?” “No,”

replied the boy, “but he can stand fast.” [Laughter] Well, can you stand fast? God help us always to stand fast in the things that we have come to learn. Sometimes, you know, it’s important for us to persevere in the will of God by doing things we don’t want to do.

Twenty-five years ago, I was in a meeting with Bob Theme in [indistinct] Church in Houston. The reason I know, if you want to know when it was, it was November the 11. November the 29th, 1968. I have it written down. I wrote this down, afterwards, and it’s in my notes. And he was speaking of the need on relying on God for inner happiness when thing are not going well outside and of the need of trusting God to make our decisions. And he referred to a young girl. I don’t think it was a specific one. But he was referring to a young girl. And maybe he had someone specific in mind, who was trying to make a decision because she was being courted by two young men. One of them was evidently a fine, upstanding young man and a Christian man, and obviously the most hopeful husband, from the Christian standpoint, for this young lady. But the other young man, though not as spiritual, in fact, may not even have been a Christian, was a very rich young man. And, Bob referred to the young girl, going to the rich young man, rather than to the godly young man, as “going into operation sugar daddy.” [Laughter] Well, there have been a lot of young people who have done that. We know that, going into operation sugar daddy. They know that God would have them marry one person, but there might be trials and tribulations if such a person were married. And so it’s so easy for us to forget in the experiences of life that the Bible is practical in those experiences.

I’m happy there are some young people here. So don’t go into operation sugar daddy. Remember, that the greatest happiness is the happiness of being in the will of God and the greatest assurance, the greatest riches, is being in the will of God.

Now, the fourth thing is, what you might expect, not only is it necessary to know his will, to do his will, to persevere in his will, the fourth thing by which we experience this text and obtain patience, is receiving the promise. That’s what he says. Just receiving

the promise. He says, “You have need of endurance so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.” The promise is promised! It’s all bound up in the Abrahamic promise, of which we have already received a great measure. But all of the experiences of our Christian lives are bound up in the fundamental great promise, the Abrahamic promise, and when we are the children of Abraham, as we are when we believe in Christ, we have the assurance of all of the things that go with the Abrahamic promises. And, the Abrahamic promises, ultimately, comprehend our presence in heaven, in the presence and joy of the experience of the Triune God. So the promise comes to fulfillment and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise is we know his will, do his will, persevere in his will. What great promises we have!

Already, in chapter 6, he’s spoken of this, in verse 13 and verse 14. He said, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely [I turned two pages instead of one...] I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so after Abraham had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. And so will you. If you know his will, you study to know his will, you do his will, you persevere in his will, you will surely receive his promise. It may not come tomorrow, but you will receive it.

Now, in verse 37, he says, introducing a passage from the Old Testament. This, incidentally, is very difficult. We don’t have time to talk about it in a meeting like this. It would be interesting to spend the whole time on it, with some who would be interested, because it involves the quotation of an Old Testament text from the Hebrew text and Old Testament in the Septuagint, and the question of why our author follows the Septuagint text and, furthermore, in why in citing the Greek translation of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew translation, he modifies the relationship of clauses and even words. But if we did that, some of you might fall asleep. Well, you wouldn’t really be qualified, some of you, to understand what’s involved in it. I suggest, if you are interested, go to some of the good commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews. One that you can read

and perhaps can understand and enter into is the commentary by F. F. Bruce, one which he revised shortly before he died and so it's relatively up to date. There are more technical ones, but that's a good one.

Now, he says, “For yet a little while, and He who is coming,” my text capitalizes the “He” and so the reference is to the coming of the Lord, “And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.” Isn't that interesting. “He will not tarry.” How often have you heard Christians say, “I'm going to do so and so if the Lord tarryes.” Have you ever heard that expression? Of course you have. But, the text says, he will not tarry. He doesn't tarry. It's almost as if our Lord delays what the eternal councils of the Trinity has determined in eternity past shall be done. He works all things according to the council in his own will. There is no uncertainty in the things that are coming to pass, from the divine standpoint. So he doesn't really tarry. The Scriptures say he will not tarry. He's not slack concerning his promises, as some men count slackness. He's long suffering to us who are not willing that any, any who? Any of his shall perish, but that all, all of them, all of them should come to repentance. Just read the verses and you'll see, he's talking about God's elect peoples. Right there in 2 Peter 3. And if you don't believe that and there may be one person in this audience who doesn't, read it, open 2 Peter chapter 3, and read those verses, noting the context before, and then you'll understand the text that says, “He's not slack concerning His promises as some men count slackness. He's long suffering to us-ward – us-ward – us believers, not willing that any of us should perish, but that all of us – that is, all of us elect – should come to repentance.”

What is it that holds the Lord back from the fulfillment of all of his promises? It's that the divine purpose of grace toward the whole family of God. He will not tarry. The moment that the Father gives the word, he, alone, knowing the hour according to our Lord's own word, the Son of Man will come forth and finish the work that he will do in his second advent.

One of the things that I read when I was a young believer was William R. Newell's book on Romans, “Romans, Verse-by-Verse.” I was still in the insurance business. I'd read one commentary on Romans. I liked Romans so good, so well, that I said, I must study it again. And so I read Newell's commentary on Romans. And I worked eight hours or, at least, I was in my office eight hours, I would work eight hours and then I would come home and study the Bible. I studied through one commentary on Romans, verse-by-verse, and I liked it. So I went back and did it again. And Mr. Newell also has a book called, “Hebrews, Verse-by-Verse,” too. And in it, he has an interesting little story.

He says, “I frequently ask an audience a question. How many of you want to go to Heaven?” Well, let's practice on you tonight. How about it? How many of you want to go to Heaven? Raise your hand! Well, it looks like it's unanimous. Now, the second question is this. “How many of you want to go to Heaven tonight?” Raise your hand? Some of you are not raising your hand. [Laughter] Some of you are not raising your hand. Did you raise your hand, Martha? [More laughter]

Well, Mr. Newell said he'd often ask audiences that and he had the same experience, except he said just a few hands went up. You, I must complement you, the great majority of you, your hands went up. But some of you knew a trick was coming, so you don't get total credit for that.

But, Mr. Newell used to say, “I know you want to go to Heaven when you have to; but you want to stay in Dallas as long as you can.” He said Florida. Isn't that true? Come on? Isn't that true? Yes, it's true. We have so many things we have to do, Lord. We just don't believe we want to make it tonight.

And, here are young people and it would be natural for young people to say, well, I have my whole life to live. Wouldn't it be better for me to live my whole life? No, I don't want to go to Heaven tonight. No. As marvelous as I expect these young people's lives to be, it would be even better if they were to go to Heaven tonight. So he's not going to tarry. He comes at the time that he is to come.

Now, the author says, as he introduces his quotation further, he says, “For yet a little while, he who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” This is one of our author’s many appeals to the Bible, as we have said. This man just loves the Bible. He really loves the Bible. And so he cites it again. This time, he appeals to Habakkuk. Habakkuk who was puzzled to hear that God would judge the covenant nation by the unrighteous Chaldeans. You remember? Habakkuk, chapter 1, that’s the problem he had. He was told by God that God is going to judge Israel by the Chaldeans. That didn’t make sense. Why should a heathen nation be used as an instrument of judgment for God’s nation, the nation Israel. And so for him it was an enigma. And he had to go through the experience of that problem. And in Habakkuk there is, of course, an answer to the question. The faithless shall fail; they are not upright. But the faithful possess the future, even though they have to pass through these experiences on the way to it. The just shall live by faith.

Now, what’s striking about that, of course, is the just shall live by faith was thought by the New Testament writers to be so important that more than one of them cite it. Paul cites it in Romans. He cites it in Galatians. Our author cites it here. “The just shall live by faith.” And, if you will study that carefully, and you could do this, whether you know Hebrew or not, really, if you would compare “The just shall live by faith,” with Genesis 15:6, where, remember, God called Abraham out and pointed him to the stars and said, “So shall thy seed be,” and Abraham believed in the Lord and it was accounted to him for righteousness. That’s what Habakkuk uses in Habakkuk chapter 2 in verse 4. You’ll notice the words, “Abraham believed.” Faith! He believed and God accounted him righteous.

And so here, “The just shall live by faith.” What this is, “The just shall live by faith,” is a statement built on Genesis 15:6. It’s the Abrahamic promises and the Abrahamic faith. That’s the saving faith. The just shall live by the faith, like Abraham’s

faith, when he believed that impossible promise that, “Your seed shall be like the stars of the heaven, innumerable in number.” No. No small company of saints are in heaven. All Calvinists! Not everybody in heaven is Calvinist. But innumerable number of people. Innumerable! It’s said that in Revelation, so many there that they cannot be numbered, like the stars of heaven.

Look, the Lord God is marvelously free in the giving of his promises. He’s not a niggardly giver. He gives like a rich loving Father, to his children. And so he has given to us. This is the true interpretation of Abraham’s experience. “The just shall live by faith.” However, trials may come and they came for Abraham, and he has not seen all of his promises yet. They look for a city that had foundations. We will get into this in chapter 11, which we start next week, the Lord willing.

This was Martin Luther’s great text; in fact, it’s the text not only of Luther, it’s the text of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was the son of Paul and the grandson of Habakkuk, because Paul got his statements from Habakkuk. And he was the grandfather. Paul the father, Luther the son. Everything found in those statements that Luther so loved is found right back in Genesis 15, Habakkuk chapter 2 and, of course, specifically in Paul’s writings.

He learned this truth, he had thought, of the righteousness of God, as when he was a Roman Catholic, he thought of the righteousness of the God as the righteousness that gives each one his due. Now, there is a sense of the righteousness of God in which that’s true. That is, God is just in his punishments as well as in his blessings, in his marvelous gifts to us he’s just also, by Jesus Christ. But Luther had only that one-sided viewpoint, that the righteousness of God is that attribute of God that gives us what we owe God, and so it was not a happy thing for him. He hated the term righteousness of God, until, finally, the Holy Spirit opened his mind and he came to understand the good news of the righteousness of God as found in the promise to Abraham and in Paul’s use of Habakkuk.

He wrote later, “It seemed to me,” I’m quoting Luther, “It seemed to me as if I had been born again.” He said some other things. He said it seemed to him as if he had entered Paradise, the very phrase “the righteousness of God, which I had hated before, was the one that I now love the best of all. That’s how that passage of Paul’s became for me the gateway to Paradise.” To know that God is righteous in justifying this sinful person here. How is He righteous? Because my sins have been laid upon my substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he has borne them. And so, he is righteous! That is, his attribute of justice is satisfied. And, his loving kindness is satisfied, too, in the gift of eternal life. So the just shall live by faith.

And our author goes on to say, “But if anyone draws back,” and, I suggest to you that this “anyone” is a reference to the proud, referred to by Habakkuk in Habakkuk chapter 2, and that what we are to understand by this is now the just shall live by faith, but the person who draws back, the proud, in Habakkuk chapter 2, “My soul has no pleasure in him.” In other words, the “any man” does not refer to the just, but it refers to the proud one who as Habakkuk says, is lifted up. Habakkuk, chapter 2. And, thus, the passage refers to the unbeliever.

Now, “The just shall live by faith,” but if anyone, like the proud, draws back, “My soul has no pleasure in him.” “Draws back”? What’s suggested by that? That’s an interesting word, incidentally, in the Greek language. It was used of the furling of sails. And those of you who have been around sail boats know what furling a sail is. Since I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, that’s something I know, what it is to furl sails.

Did you know, also, that this word was used of a dog, when the dog tucked its tail under, because of fear, and fled? So we can think of that when we say, “Now, the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back,” tucks his tail under because of fear, turns from the Lord, furls his sails in following the Lord Jesus Christ. The text says, “My soul has no pleasure in him.”

In other words, this is an expression of confidence in the Hebrews to whom he is writing. Notice how he puts it in verse 39. He says, “But we [As over against these who draw back.] But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Incidentally, to my mind, and mind you I’m not so dogmatic that if I live a few more years, and I study Hebrews, continue to study it, it’s possible I may change my mind about some things. I like to be open as I read and study the Bible. I think that’s fair enough. But I like to believe what I believe, at the moment, from my study, and say that’s the way I see this. But my mind is not totally closed when we come to interpretations of individual texts. Now, that may shock some of you. You think my mind’s closed about everything, some of you. Well, thank you for thinking that I have the assurance of the Spirit’s teaching. But, I’m really not quite like that. In some things I have a very strong confidence in the word of God. I certainly don’t have any doubts about the essence of the Gospel of Christ. I don’t have any doubts about the essence of the sovereign grace of God in our salvation. I don’t have any of that. But there are many passages in the Bible I still study. I ask myself, again, am I right about this? And I have changed a few things and probably will change some more if I live long enough.

But, the question in the Epistle to the Hebrews is, all who read it face it, one way or another, they face this question. The Hebrews contains a number of warnings; are the warnings against the failure of believers? Or, are the warnings against the apostasy of professors? In other words, are these warnings addressed to people who are true believers? And, their alternative is their loss of fellowship with the Lord? Or, perhaps, the loss of, as some have suggested, millennial blessings. Or, is the alternative eternal judgment?

Now, this passage, I think, has a lot to say about that question. Notice, “We are not of those who draw back to perdition.” Perdition? In other words, the alternative is Heaven; the enjoyment of the promises of God, the blessings of God, which you already

have in part and will have. And the alternative to it is not loss of fellowship, not loss of millennial blessing, the loss, the alternative, he says, is perdition!

Now, that's not made plain in the other warnings. “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?” Escape what? One might say to the author. You didn't say what we would escape. Loss of fellowship? Or loss of salvation? But, we have the clue, I think, here. “We are not of those who draw back to perdition.” That word occurs, I believe, eighteen times in the New Testament, *apoleia*. Whenever it has to do with a human being, it refers to perdition, eternal punishment, not waste. Now, when it refers to a physical substance, it can be called perdition. In that case, it may refer to something that is wasted. But when it refers to a human being it always refers to perdition. And, I have a series of passages here, if you interested in looking them up. I don't have time to cite them, but I'll tell them to you. John 17, well, I am going to cite the references. 17:12 John, 17, verse 12. 2 Thessalonians 2:3. 2 Peter 2:1. Revelation, chapter 17, verse 8 and verse 11, and Romans 9:22.

So to my mind, the only view of these warnings that permits a consistent interpretation of the alternatives in the warnings is to take the alternative as being perdition. And if that's so then the warnings are against apostasy; not against loss of fellowship of believers, but they are against apostasy, individuals who have made profession of the faith but only profession.

Now, we have one minute and I want to just close with a couple of thoughts. First of all, one of the great truths of the doctrine of sovereign grace is the perseverance of the saints. On the divine side, that is true of all the elect, all the elect persevere, there is no doubt whatsoever about it. They persevere.

What do we mean by perseverance? Not that they live a certain kind of life that is always regarded as a good life by the Scriptures or by our Lord. When we say they persevere, we mean they never are individuals who lose their faith. That is, they are always within the family of God. For God has implanted within them eternal life and

having eternal life, they'll always have that positive response to the word of God and the promise concerning eternal life.

They may deny it from time to time, but if God has enlightened us by regeneration, the regenerated man inevitably, always, will have that fundamental faith in the Lord God, even when they are sinning. And poor Peter, warned by the Lord, “Peter, you'll deny Me three times before the cock crows.” And so he did it! He did it! Think of that, warned by the Lord, Himself. He did it! And so he went out and what did he do? Dance? Wept bitterly! A man who has forthrightly denied our Lord Jesus Christ, still within him the faith implanted by God the Holy Spirit was there. And it's not long before this man stands up in the city of Jerusalem and boldly proclaims the Gospel of Christ. And if tradition is true, he lost his life, ultimately, for his Christian faith.

From the human side, no elect person can really know he's elect until he believes and no believer can know he shall persevere except while actually persevering. Chapter 3 verse 6, chapter 3 verse 12, give us points that bear on that.

Therefore, let me conclude by saying this. May he keep us from drawing back, through unreadiness of human heart, to endure as seeing him who is invisible. How marvelous it is to see God as one who is invisible.

I have a lovely little story that illustrates the point. Father and mother were out for the evening and they had left little Mary for the first time in the sole care of her grandmother. And by and by, grandmother did what many grandmothers do, she took the little girl upstairs, heard her say her prayers and covered her up in bed. They she turned out the light and started out of the room. “Oh, Grandma, mother always leaves a light burning till I go to sleep.” “Oh,” said the old grandmother, “God is here with you. He's in the darkness.” Have you ever told your children that? I did! That's what I used to do with my children, go up in the little room they had upstairs, only one room, while I was going through seminary, knelt down by the side of their beds and tell them the Lord was with them. And she said, “God's with you. He's in the darkness as well as in the

light. Don't forget, he's here with you.” So she went down to the living room below and after a little while there's a patter of little feet and a tremulous voice. “Grandma? Please turn on the light for me till I get to sleep?” “Oh, my dear, God is there with you. Go back to bed.” And, reluctantly, the little one obeyed. But by and by, came the pleading voice down the stairs. “Grandma? Grandma? Please come up here and stay with God while I go down there where the light is?” [Laughter]

Well, I think, we can all appreciate that maybe we are old enough now to realize that the Lord really and truly is in the dark with us and in the experiences of life, as well.

Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the time together and the word of God, and we praise Thee for all that we have through Jesus Christ. As our author now turns to point to various of the saints of Old Testament days, to encourage us further, may we be responsive to Thy truth. We pray for each one in this auditorium and ask, Lord, Thy blessing upon them. Lord, give them the perseverance of which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to have. May we have that true endurance that glorifies Thy name?

For Jesus' sake. Amen.