



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Proclamation of the Passion,” Matthew 16:21-23

TRANSCRIPT

Our subject, as we continue our exposition of the Gospel of Matthew, is “the Proclamation of the Passion,” and we are turning to chapter 16 again and reading for our Scripture three verses, verse 21, 22 and 23. These verses constitute the first serious direct announcement of the cross by our Lord to the disciples, and so the verses are extremely important for that reason. That is why we are going to concentrate on the three verses for our study today. Verse 21 of Matthew chapter 16,

“From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.’ (These words incidentally are very strong. In the original text what Peter said literally was, may God be merciful to thee Lord. This shall by no means be to thee. So it’s a very strong demurral, an expression of opposition to the statement that our Lord would suffer and die.) But he turned, and said unto Peter, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan: thou

art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that are of
God, but those that are of men.”

May God bless this reading of his word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are again grateful to Thee that we are able to open the
Scriptures and listen to the message that Yhou hast given us through the in the Spirit, and
we ask Lord that thou wilt enable us to mind the thing that are of God and not the things
that are of men.

Enable us Lord to understand the things that thou art doing and enable us to put
them first in our lives. We thank Thee for the joy of Christian life and for the fellowship
that we enjoy with the and with one another in our Lord Jesus Christ. And we rejoice in
all that Thou hast made possible for us by the fact that thou hast created this universe and
also by the fact that thou hast redeemed us through the blood of our Messianic king who
is not only a Messiah, but a suffering Messiah, and so we worship the and we praise Thee
and we thank Thee. We rejoice in all of the things that thou art accomplishing.

And we especially Lord rejoice in the certainty that they shall reach their fruition,
and we look forward to the day when our great triune God is glorified in the eyes and
minds and hearts of men throughout the face of this globe.

We pray thy blessing upon the whole church of Jesus Christ today. Bless the
ministry of the word wherever it takes place, not only here in this building but in the
places where the gospel is preached in this city, this state, this country, to the four corners
of the earth. And we would pray that if it should please thee Lord that thou wilt make
the word of God fruitful, enable it to run and have free course and may many come to the
knowledge of Jesus Christ, and join this great body of the true church of believers in him.
And prepare us Lord for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Enable us Lord to rejoice and to hope and anticipate and live in the light of the
great hope that we have. We pray for the young people who are gathered here in this

auditorium and pray, O God, that thy blessing may be upon them, that the visions that come from holy Scripture may be their visions for their own lives. Enable them to be fruitful, to please thee in their lives, to honor thy name, exalt and exalt the Lord Jesus.

We pray for the sick and ask Lord that thou wilt encourage them and strengthen them. We know Lord how discouraging it is to be ill, and we do pray that thou wilt in thy wonderful grace strengthen and encourage and lift up and give a sense of thy presence and thy enablement. May the Lord Jesus be an especial comfort to the ill. We pray for those who are discouraged and defeated who need other forms of divine strength. O God, work mightily to accomplish Thy purposes.

And we know Lord there are times when we must be ourselves put through the disciplines of life. Enable us to come forth from our testings and our trials in the way that thou wouldst have us to come forth. Enable us to say as the Psalmist has said that Thou didst put us through our trials and our testings, Thou hast sent us through the fire and through the waters, that Thou hast brought us out into a large and beautiful place. May Thy blessing be upon us in this hour as we hear the Scriptures.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Prayer] Our subject in this hour is “The Proclamation of the Passion.” With chapter 16 and verse 21 through verse 23, a new milestone in the earthly career of the King, our Lord Jesus, has begun. He has been giving instruction, but now, amidst the developing opposition, there comes developing instruction regarding the cross. I think it’s rather striking that there is a parallel between the statement in chapter 16 verse 21 and a statement that we looked at a long time ago in chapter 4 verse 17. Remember, in the 4th chapter after the account of the temptation and the early healing ministry of the Lord Jesus, Matthew the evangelist has written, “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And then again in chapter 16 verse 21 in an expression which in the original text is almost identical, he says, “From that time

forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples how he must go unto Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed.”

So this expression “from that time, he began” is identical in both of these places and on the basis of this some have suggested that we may divide the Gospel of Matthew into the two parts, because these similar expressions mark two epochs in the Gospel. In the first we have his preaching of repentance for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand, and then as it has become evident that the ministry of the Lord Jesus is not being received, finally the Lord Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for the time of his passion in Jerusalem, and from now on there will in our Lord’s teaching assume the major stress of words concerning his cross shall be prominent. There have been veiled hints of our Lord’s demise in previous statements that have been made.

For example, in the early chapters of the Gospel of John he had said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up,” a veiled hint of his suffering and death and resurrection. He had said to Nicodemus in the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of John, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, a veiled reference to his cross. Then in chapter 9 and verse 15 of the Gospel of Matthew, he had said that the bridegroom would be taken away, another veiled reference to his sufferings. In chapter 12 verse 39 and verse 40, he was more definite by saying that as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Lord Jesus would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And then even in chapter 16, in the earlier part, he had alluded to the sign of the prophet Jonah.

So, we have had a number of hints of our Lord’s death, but now plain speech becomes the rule, because the men must be prepared for the age in which he would be absent and in which they would have the responsibility of disseminating the word of kingdom.

It’s also interesting to me that as Satan was present at the inception of the announcement of the kingdom in that temptation which our Lord successfully managed to

undergo, so here at the announcement of his sufferings of the cross. He recognizes in the words of Peter that Satan is present and using as a tool the apostle who has just been called by the Lord Jesus, blessed. So it’s rather striking then at the beginning of the ministry of the king we have Satan active, and now here at the beginning of the ministry which touches primarily the cross he is again evidently active.

Klaus Schil,der, one of the better Dutch theologians of the 20th Century, has an exposition of this section which he has entitled—I was tempted to use it as the title but didn’t want to steal his title—“Satan At the Pulpit of the Passion.” And that’s a beautiful description of just exactly what is happening here. Satan is present as our Lord mounts his pulpit and begins to teach the disciples concerning his passion.

In the 21st verse we have the revelation of that passion. From that time forth, Jesus began to show to his disciples how he must suffer and die in Jerusalem. So here we have full and open expression of his coming denoument, and the apostles, if they were listening—and they evidently were not listening too well as later Scripture shows—would have learned now that not only is he the Messiah, but he is a suffering Messiah. Peter has confessed him, thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And now in order to fill out the teaching, the Lord Jesus will in effect say, yes I am the Messiah, but I am to be a suffering Messiah. So the partial, then, is replaced by the full. The hints are replaced by exhibition, even proof, for the word translated “show” here is a word that really means “to exhibit,” “to prove” in the Book of James.

I gather from this that the Lord Jesus did not simply say that he was going to suffer, but he explained in some to some extent what was going to happen. So this then is not the first time that the Lord Jesus speaks of his sufferings, but it is the first time that he speaks fully of them.

Students of the Scriptures for many years have made studies of the stations of the cross, and particularly in the liturgical churches a great deal is made over this. We have, I’m sure, if we’ve studied anything in church history or been around a liturgical church, a

church in which formal worship is more prominent than exposition of the word of God, you’ve heard expressions like the *via dolorosa*, the sad way. It is a reference to the steps that the Lord Jesus took from the judgment hall when he was condemned to Calvary.

And very intensive study has been made of this in church tradition, and fourteen steps or fourteen stations have been singled out for special attention as our Lord made his way from the judgment hall to Calvary. The places where he stopped made some significant statement or some significant thing happened are marked out and attention is given to them. Sometimes legend is introduced, such as the legend of Veronica, who is supposed to have emerged from the doorway of her house just as the Lord Jesus passed by and loaned her handkerchief. That, too, is part of the fourteen stations.

Now we do not believe that the Lord Jesus—I speak for myself when I say we—I do not believe that the Lord Jesus understood fully as a child all the aspects of the death that he would die. I do believe that the Scriptures make it plain that he recognized from the beginning that he was to be about his Father’s business. He knew he would be doing the will of God and that is what he was doing, but the details of his suffering were made known to him as he grew and matured, as he studied the holy Scriptures in his human nature. From the divine nature, of course, he knew the end from the beginning and knew all of the steps and all of the details and even many that are not recorded in the word of God. So from his boyhood he knew that he must be about his Father’s business. And even a child soon learns that if an individual, a Christian man is to be about the Father’s business, he is going to discover that the world is not too friendly to the person who seeks to do completely the will of God.

Now then one might ask the question, well, if there are more stations than fourteen, and there surely are because the Lord was from the beginning about the Father’s business, how did the Lord Jesus discover that he was to die in Jerusalem, be buried and be raised again the third day? How did he know? Did that just come to him as some immediate revelation from the Father?

No, I do not really think that that is true. Later on when he makes one of the other announcements of his cross – remember he makes three distinct announcements of the cross, and the apostles do not understand, it appears, at any of them fully what he was saying. But when he introduces one of the announcements in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 18 and verse 31, he introduces it this way: then he took unto him the Twelve and said unto them, “Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished.”

And then he goes on to say, “For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles and shall be mocked and spitefully treated and spit on.” But notice, all things that have been written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished, so that we gather from this then that the Lord Jesus knew the things that would transpire concerning his sufferings by the study of the word of God. That is, by the pondering of the holy Scriptures. Evidently the word of God was the staff and stay of our Lord Jesus in his ministry. He was a person who never could have gotten along without the Scriptures near at hand. He studied them. He found in them the sure word of prophecy. He read them in such a way that he saw himself in them, as the Holy Spirit instructed him in his human nature.

He, the King of Truth, recognizes in the Scriptures nothing less than the infallible record of the revelation of his heavenly Father. And if we ever needed a proof of the inspiration of holy Scripture, that would be the preeminent proof, that our Lord Jesus regarded these Scriptures as inspired and so reliable that he forged and fashioned and formed his whole experience by the study of the word of God. He bears it day and night upon his heart. He decides all of his actions according to the statutes of the word of God.

Just as in a well known church organization, everything is settled by Canon law, for the Lord Jesus Canon law was what do the Scriptures say, and he followed it implicitly and explicitly. That word from God put an end to all kinds of questions regarding the proper steps that he must take. It is for him the infallible guiding star of his light,

someone had said. That’s how he knew. That’s how he knew what the prophets said concerning the Son of Man. That’s why he knew that they must be accomplished. And it is upon the word of God that he grounded his life. He bowed to every jot and tittle of it and made it his life.

Now I don’t think that we need any real exhortation concerning that. If the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, the divine Son of God, the one person who possesses a divine and human nature, in his human nature made the word of God preeminent, then what about you and me, we who are sinners? We who do not see clearly? We whose minds and hearts and wills have been affected by the noetic effects of sin, so that we are blind, rebellious, corrupt—how much more ought we to listen to the holy Scripture? What a tremendous lesson this is, it seems to me. All things that the prophets have written must be accomplished in me. Therefore, I go to Jerusalem.

Now he states that he must go unto Jerusalem. He doesn’t say I shall go. He says I must go. Now he’s going to say that he is going to suffer. Now he will suffer, he will be slain, and he will be raised on the third day. Incidentally, being raised again indicates that this is not the voice of a martyr. He’s not saying I’m going up there, and they’re going to crucify me, and that’s the end of me. Some of us might say that when we fancy that we are being inflicted by others. We might think, well we’re being a martyr to something, and so they’re going to get us, and that’s going to be the end of us. But the Lord Jesus does not speak like a martyr.

He’s a person who is the master of an ageless life, and therefore he says, I’m going to Jerusalem, I’m going to suffer, I’m going to be killed, but I’m going to rise again on the third day. I love that expression. He doesn’t even say I’m going to rise, but I’m going to rise on the third day.

I always think of Talleyrand when I think of that, because there is an old story about that bishop turned skeptic who was prominent in the age of the French Revolution. They sought, some of those involved in that revolution, to establish a new religion to take

the place of Christianity. They had very little results. Finally they complained in the presence of Talleyrand, and Talleyrand said, “Why it’s no problem to establish a new religion.” They said, what do you mean? He said, “Well all you have to do is to prophesy that you are going to be slain and that you will rise again on the third day and then bring it to pass, and you’ll find it very simple to establish a new religion.” The Lord Jesus Christ’s prophecies were always so definite.

But now to come to this word *must*—incidentally, all theories of the atonement are attempts to explain this little word, *must*. Why must he suffer? Why must he die? Why must he be raised from the dead? There must be something of tremendous and immense importance if the Lord Jesus should say, I must go to Jerusalem and I must suffer and I must be killed and I must be raised on the third day. If we thought for a few moments, we would realize, I’m sure, that forgiveness cannot come from God in heaven by a voluntary declaration.

If men have been created and have sinned against their Creator, and if it is true that he is a Holy God—and that is plain and evident from his revelation—then if we thought for a few moments as Anselm did about this matter, we would have to conclude that God could not pronounce us forgiven in a word from heaven. Because the question would immediately arise, well what about your holiness, what about your justice? Even God cannot forgive men in that way, for his justice and his holiness demand satisfaction. It is a law of his being that the wages of sin is death. And so even God cannot from heaven violate his own being, contradict his own attributes and properties, act as an unholy person and not demand the full payment of the law.

Nor on the other hand could God forgive if we simply confess our sins. It’s not enough for men to confess sin for God to forgive. There must be a righteous basis for forgiveness. There must be a reason why God is satisfied in his holiness and righteousness and thereby is able to offer to men a pardon, a forgiveness, a justification upon the grounds of trust on the part of men. That’s what’s involved in this “*must*.” And

evidently the Lord Jesus believed, to put it in the language of modern theology, he believed in a penal, substitutionary theory of the atonement.

That will become even more evident when we turn to passages like Matthew chapter 20 verse 28, and then again in chapter 26 and verse 28. He must die because God’s law must be satisfied in the execution of the penalty upon a substitute. And it is only by virtue of that that we have life. And incidentally, my dear Christian friends, when God saved us he did not relax his requirements in the slightest, but met his own requirements fully in the gift of the Son, so that the salvation that we have is a salvation that we have not because God has over looked his requirements, not because he has minimized them, not because he has bypassed some of them.

But we have our salvation on a righteous basis so that when we get to heaven and we knock on the pearly gates—those nonexistent pearly gates I presume—but to use the language of men, when we knock on the gates we don’t have to apologize at all, we can say, throw open the gates, I deserve to be here, because I rest on the righteousness of my God conferred upon me by grace through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

Now of course when I say, I deserve, I do not mean that in myself, but by righteousness I am in heaven. That’s what, why the Apostle Paul says that grace might reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Well now, in the light of that, it makes it to me very obvious that any preaching of the gospel that stresses any other thing than this penal substitutionary death of our Lord Jesus by which he accomplishes a satisfaction of God’s righteousness and holiness is less than true gospel preaching.

There was well known liberal man who was the minister at City Temple in London, England. When you read the writings of Mr. Campbell, you read the writings of man who had a very very fine mind and a very sympathetic spirit. But he did not understand the fullness of the revelation concerning the redemption in the Lord Jesus. If you read his writings you’ll be amazed, I think, to discover how he dwells so persistently

on the fringes of the New Testament teaching. We do not deny for one moment that there is in the gospel of Jesus Christ social implication. But those things are the fringes of the biblical teaching.

Now in Mr. Campbell’s writings, you will find that Jesus appears chiefly and absorbingly as a social reformer. What he has done is to take the fringes of the teaching and make the fringes the prior teaching, and those great statements of our Lord which are on every page of the record which speak of his redemption, they are assigned a secondary place.

Yesterday in our morning newspaper we were told that we should not fear controversy. One of our large denominations has had a meeting recently and some of the things that were said in this meeting reflect, it seems to me, the fact that in this large group there is a great stress on the incidentals or the fringes and an almost total overlooking of the important aspects of our Lord’s ministry.

One of the men said that being a Christian means doing things and not reciting a creed. Of course, we will agree with that. He went on to say that the board of which he is a part is involved in three activities, survival issues, like hunger and energy and nuclear warfare, concern about quality of life, and evangelism. The last sounds very good except the evangelism is not the evangelism of the Scriptures but evangelism in an institutional way. To spell it out, one of the men went on to say some issues force themselves upon us like capital punishment, they galvanize us into action, others we are continually working on like energy, the South Africa question, U.S.-China relations, and national health insurance.

Now can you imagine as you read the New Testament that these issues are the issues that stand out in the ministry? No, of course not. They are the secondary and tertiary issues. And some of them are not even issues at all, in my opinion. But the point that I want to make is that if we are to read the New Testament, we must put the prior things prior, the first things first, and the first things are the things that concern the

redemptive ministry of the Lord Jesus, his suffering in Jerusalem, his death, his resurrection, and all that flows out of that great redemptive act.

I’m sure that the Lord Jesus admired art. I’m sure that it would not have been out of his character for him to visit an art museum. I am sure that he admired literature. I can imagine him sitting down and reading some literature that was outstanding of the day. We see little in—by the way, we see little evidence of it in his in his statements that are made in the word, but I can see that that may have been a part of his life. Surely he was great admirer of the natural world about him because that revealed his Father, and from his divine nature, he himself had had a part in the making of that world.

I am sure that there must have been in him some pondering of statesmanship. He was able to call Herod, a fox. He knew something about what was going on in the world. But he was clearly conscious that the great purpose of his life was to accomplish the things that had been foreordained before the foundation of the world. These were the things that really dominated the Lord Jesus.

And I love the way in which he is so certain in what he must do, and even spells out the details. It’s not only that he is going to Jerusalem, he must go to Jerusalem. It’s not that he’s going anywhere, he’s going to Jerusalem. It’s not that he will suffer some things, he will suffer many things. And it’s not that he will suffer from men in general, but from the elders and chief priests, and it’s not simply that he will be, that he will suffer, but he will be slain. And it’s not simply that he will be raised again from the dead, he will be raised again on the third day.

And in the other statements, he will tell us additional facts. In other words, there is a kind of certainty about his teaching that he derived from the word of God. And I want to say to you my dear Christian friend, you who read the Scriptures, it is possible for you to know the facts of your own life and to be able to relate them to the divine purpose for your life in a much more meaningful way if you become a student of the

word of God as our Lord Jesus Christ was. If he is an illustration for us in anything, it is an illustration for us in the absolutely first importance of the word of God in our lives.

Well, now we have seen Peter at his best, thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. Blessed art thou Simon Barjona. Now we shall see him at his worst. He is the tool of the tempter. What an upheaval must have constantly taken place in the life of Peter the fisherman. One moment on the clouds, the next moment on the ground, even almost under the ground.

So Peter, evidently following just a few steps behind the Lord Jesus, reached forward, took him by the shoulder and said, be it far from thee Lord, this shall by no means be unto thee. May God have mercy upon you Lord, this shall by no means be unto thee. That, incidentally, was a gesture, taking him, that implied protection if not superiority, so most of the commentators have understood it.

The verb that is used is the same verb that was used by Priscilla and Aquilla when they heard Apollos speaking in the assembly and determined that he only knew the things that concerned the ministry of John the Baptist, and needed to be further instructed in the word, and so they took him home and gave him a course in theology at home taught by a woman and a man. That was humbling. But Priscilla must have been a good teacher.

What was Peter’s problem? This shall not be unto thee. Well Peter evidently saw the Lord Jesus as a political Messiah, but he did not see him as a Messiah who must suffer. He has just confessed, thou art the Messiah the Son of the living God, and he needs to be instructed in the fact that the Messiah that Israel has is a suffering Messiah. He had thought of a messiah who would immediately by his coming defeat the Romans, establish again Israel as the head of the nations, and all the nations of the earth should flow into Jerusalem and worship Jehovah.

And so the Apostle Peter, chief of the apostles so we are told, comes, ascends the rostrum, puts an interfering hand upon the shoulder of the Great Prophet, and as a human Satan makes this diabolical statement, this shall not be unto thee, and by this attempts to

thwart the purpose of God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit. Someone has said Peter was the first to scale the pinnacle of a full understanding of Messiahship. Well, he’s the first to stumble over the rock afterwards.

Peter doesn’t even realize that if the Son does not die, then there’s no hope for him. How wrong can you be and yet love the Lord at the same time? William Girdle, one of the old Puritans, used to say, “The devil is a great student in divinity,” and he knew exactly what our Lord was about evidently, he knew that whatever he was about would mean the overthrow of his kingdom, and so anything that he could do to deter the Lord Jesus, even through one of his disciples, would be something that he would try.

Now when you turn to verse 23, you want to say, now the pope will get his. Peter took him and began to rebuke him, verse 22 has said. The Lord Jesus evidently didn’t even let him finish. I like that, because he does not dally with temptation. He doesn’t even allow Peter to finish. I imagine Peter had some other words that he would like to say too, and would have been willing to expound the fact that he did not want the Lord Jesus to go and die, but the panorama of the wilderness temptation arises before the mind of the Lord Jesus, and he remembers that he has dealt with Satan before over this same issue, and recognizes in Peter’s words that Peter has become the tool of Satan himself.

Now this probably is an even greater test for our Lord since it comes from one who is to be part of his bride, the body of Christ, and from one for whom he is about to die. Think of that. A person for whom Christ is about to die, in order to give him eternal salvation is the means by which Satan would seek to deter the Lord from accomplishing his work.

So the Lord turns back to Peter who has grasped him by the shoulder and says, “Get thee behind me Satan!” Satan means adversary. Is that too strong a word for Peter? To call the apostle, Satan? To call him an adversary? To call him a devil? No, it’s not too

strong a word. It was a hellish idea to suggest that Jesus Christ should not go to the cross.

Now we will see when we study the transfiguration a couple of weeks from today, the Lord willing, that Peter still hasn’t learned his lesson. Luke, incidentally, when he makes the announcement later on about the apostles being told that the Lord would suffer, adds the words, “But they understood none of these things.” Isn’t it amazing? It seems so plain and clear to us, that the apostles still did not understand? But it is a hellish idea because if our Lord does not suffer there is no redemption. No redemption for anyone. Not only Peter. Thou art an offense, a trap, a death stick.

Now in ancient times, a trap was a means by which animals were trapped. And the death stick, the offense, the death stick was that critical stick which if you touched, the trap enclosed upon its prey, and that’s the word that our Lord uses here of Peter. Peter, you are a death stick for me. So here is a man who loves the Lord and yet at the same time he’s a trap for Jesus Christ. A death stick. If Peter is the prime apostle, there is a primacy of evil as well as of good in this man. Incidentally, that’s one of the reasons we believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures; the Scriptures not only detail the good points of men but also their bad points as well. It is realistic.

Now I think there is a point here that needs a little bit of application. I cannot make much but I want to make just a word or two, and it’s dangerous to make just a word or two without a full explanation. But what I want to suggest to you is this. It is possible for a man who really loved Jesus Christ to be a trap, to be an offense. It is possible for a man who loves the Lord to do things that are just as hellish hellish and diabolical as this suggestion. What was Peter’s problem? It was ignorance of holy Scripture. He acted out of his own human nature, his own love for Jesus Christ apart from the divine revelation.

Now it seems to me that we have an application of this in all of the many activities which in the local church impinge upon the priority of the word of God. It is possible for

individuals who love the Lord to make diabolically hellish suggestions concerning the ministry of the local church. It’s sad but true. And often they are made out of the best human intentions. Peter’s human intentions were good. He didn’t like the concept of Jesus being slain by the rulers in Jerusalem. That was something that was very bad for him. And so he acted out of that human love for Jesus Christ, but it was not divine. It was not understanding. It was not enlightened activity.

It was actually diabolical. And there are many things that happen in the local church in which substitutions are made for the primacy of the word of God. I wish it were possible for me to speak about all of them, but I could not in this brief time without creating a false impression. It is important that we have fellowship with one another, but the object of our fellowship is always primarily the Lord Jesus. You remember in the early church the apostles, in the earliest church meetings? The statement is made that they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.

Incidentally, that word, fellowship, is defined by the two words that follow, the contrast the construction in the Greek text makes it evident that the early church continued in three things, not four, in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship. What kind of fellowship? The breaking of bread and prayers. That’s the fellowship. That’s the fellowship of the local church. When people speak about fellowship, the primary fellowship is the fellowship we have in our common love and interest in Jesus Christ.

Now I want to say to you that there is no greater fellowship than to be with Christians and to speak of the glories of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That’s the fellowship. It isn’t a banquet. A banquet’s all right. It isn’t a party. A party’s all right. It isn’t fun and games together. Fun and games are fine. It isn’t attending meetings together in which we see some gladiators out on some some green engage in stupid activity, [laughter] like football which I love so much.

Fellowship is the common enjoyment that we have of the things of Christ. And it is spelled out as the breaking of bread and prayers. In other words, we’re talking about

priorities. Those things are great and good, as long as they are secondary, tertiary perhaps. The fellowship is the fellowship of the common love that we have for Christ. Nothing greater than true Christian fellowship.

Now Peter is a good man, a great man. He learned his lesson on the Day of Pentecost. When he stood up to preach, the one thing he preached was that the Messiah must suffer, you have taken him with wicked hands, you have crucified him according to the determinant counsel and foreknowledge of God, and God has raised him up because it was not possible that he should be holden of death. That’s one thing I like about Peter. He stumbles so, but he learned his lesson and then preached in the fervor of his love for the Lord the truth that he had missed before.

Why be called Satan? Jesus explains, thou art an offense unto me Peter, for thou savorest not the things that are of God but those that are of men. What are the things of God? Well they are the things of self-expandability of the Son of God. They are the things of human sin. They are the things of divine substitution. They are the things of the satisfaction of the holiness and righteousness of God. They are the things of the resurrection. They are the things which touch the whole redemptive work of the Son of God. They are the things of God.

What are the things of men? Self-seeking that leads to destruction. Telling our Lord Jesus, don’t suffer there, it might be a little tough on your disciples, too, you know. So Peter asks for his own damnation really when he engages himself in the things of men. But the violent gusts of hell cannot cause the Savior to waver. Consuming holiness and flaming love spontaneously yield to the determinate will and counsel of God. Even the multitudes with their misdirected enthusiasm to make him a Messiah, but not a suffering one, or the misdirected affection of the Apostle Peter, cannot seduce him from accomplishing his work of prophet, priest, and king. The prophet who tells us the truth about God, the priest who offers the once and for all sacrifice for his people, and the king who shall come and establish his kingdom.

Well let me conclude. It’s evident that the heights of heaven and the depths of hell lie very close to each other. This man who is called blessed in verse 17, is in verse 23 called Satan. John Buyan used to say, “There is a way to hell from the very gates of heaven.” We see it in the lives of the saints. Take Jacob, for example. Jacob is a person who can cheat right after he has made a vow to God.

Hazael is a man whom the prophet can tell will be a person who will murder and pillage and destroy even children. Hazael replies, “Is thy servant a dog that he should do these things?” But in a few short days that’s exactly what he’s doing.

Moses can commune with God on the holy mount, but then in anger break the holy tables of the law. A man may awaken in the morning with a Psalm, and before the sun has set, he’s practically made his bed in hell. And Elijah can face Ahab and the prophets and soon be running for his life from Jezebel.

David can be thinking of building a temple for God and then by his activity can make the Gentiles blaspheme the God of Israel. It’s true, the heights of heaven and the depths of hell lie very close to each other.

And I think it’s also true that we as individuals are either climbing or we’re descending, and one act does not really reveal the kind of person that we are. That’s very comforting. Take a Peter. The bent of his life was upward, but here and there he could fall and fall to the depths so that he’s called a Satan. The bent of David’s life is upward, but he can commit his great sin of adultery. The bent of Saul’s life is downward but he can confess that he has sinned against David. It’s not the individual act that reveals the man’s character.

There is a work of poetry which John Hay has written about Jim Bledsoe, the godless, blasphemous Mississippi river boat engineer, who, when fire was discovered on the *Prairie Belle*, by virtue of his dedication to his ship, he runs the *Prairie Belle* against the river bank and stands by his post until he loses his life, and John Hay has a stanza or two that goes that go like this: “He weren’t no saint but at judgment I’d run my chance

with him/ longside of some pious gentleman that wouldn’t shook hands with him. He seen his duty, a dead sure thing, and went for it far and then/ and Christ ain’t a going to be too hard on a man that died for men. He had the idea that it was possible by some great act of devotion to a cause to gain eternal life by what we do.

The facts of Scripture are that eternal life is obtained as gift of grace when a man recognizes his sin and in a moment puts his faith and trust in the Redeemer who died as the substitute under the judgment of God, that sins might be forgiven. And the lives of every saint are lives that are ascending, and the individual act does not reveal the true nature of things, just as the lives of those who have rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ are lives that are on the descending path. And one great act of philanthropy cannot tell the true story of the heart.

So I say to you this morning, the Lord Jesus, thank God, rejected the test that came from his own apostle and nevertheless went with one mind and heart to Calvary and offered that once and for all sacrifice by which sins may be forgiven. If you are here in the audience this morning, and God has brought it home to your heart that you are a sinner, you’re a candidate for his redemption. It is offered to you. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. All who believe shall be saved.

If God the Holy Spirit has brought conviction to your heart that you are a sinner and that you are under divine condemnation as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, I plead with you to come to him. Rely upon him and the work that he has accomplished and pass from death into life and from darkness into his marvelous light. May God give you grace to come. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are indeed grateful, Lord that through the ministry of the word of God, the Lord Jesus in his human nature learned that his task would be that of the servant of Jehovah who would suffer and die and be raised again from the dead.

“The Proclamation of the Passion” by S. Lewis Johnson
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And we thank Thee that all our hope, all our righteousness, all our confidence for time and eternity rests upon that which he did. We praise Thee that through the Holy Spirit Thou hast given us assurance that we have life.

And O God, if there should be someone in this audience who does not know him, O Father work in their hearts, through the Holy Spirit give enlightenment. May the shaft of divine light strike deep into their minds and spirits. May they recognize their hopeless and lost condition, desperate condition, and turn to him offers life to all who believe.

May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.