



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Eschatology

“Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ”

TRANSCRIPT

Last time we were looking at the Church and the Tribulation. And as I mentioned at the concluding, at the conclusion of the hour, we were not really able to finish the exposition and interpretation of Revelation Chapter 3 and Verse 10, and I want to do that for a few minutes before we go into our subject.

Remember that in the last hour, the subject was the Church and the Tribulation, and we sought to discuss the question of the time of the rapture of the church and the resurrection of the church with reference to the tribulation period of the future. As I remember, we discussed, first of all, the premillennial order of events. We pointed out that the Messianic kingdom is future, that the Second Advent is premillennial, that the tribulation is future, that the tribulation is premillennial and preadventist, and the rapture is premillennial.

We discussed the debated views of the tribulation with reference to the rapture, and specifically we were discussing questions such as when does the rapture take place with reference to the tribulation. We attempted to show that there were three prevailing views with reference to the rapture and the tribulation, that there are individuals who hold the view that the rapture of the church, the resurrection of the church may take place take at the same time, will take place just before our Lord returns to the earth to establish his

millennial kingdom. So that the rapture will be and our Lord will be involved in a kind of procession like this: he will come to the air; the church will be caught up to meet him in the air; the dead in Christ shall be resurrected given bodies like his body; we, who are alive and remain, shall be caught up together with them; they shall return with the Lord and almost immediately return to the earth at his Second Advent, at which time he will establish the millennial kingdom. That is a view held by some outstanding scholars, a minority view but nevertheless held by some important men.

Then there are some who hold that the rapture and the resurrection of the church takes place in the middle of the tribulation period. We should have put three-and-a-half years here in order to go with the three-and-a-half on this part of the tribulation, dividing it in half, so that the rapture takes place in the middle of the tribulation, the church returns to be in the air with the Lord or in heaven with the Lord until the three-and-a-half years of the latter part of the tribulation is finished. The Lord then returns to the earth to establish his kingdom of a thousand years.

And then by far the great majority of premillennialists hold that the rapture of the church is pretribulational. That is, that it occurs at the beginning of the seven-year period of the tribulation. The church meets the Lord in the air, returns with him to heaven, and is there with him while the judgments are being poured out upon the earth, upon both Gentiles and Jews. And then at the conclusion of the tribulation period, the Lord will return to the earth and will bring about his kingdom.

Now, we were talking about Revelation Chapter 3 and verse 10 because this verse is probably debated about as much as any verse that has to do with the time of the rapture of the church, and I want you to turn to it with me for just a moment. I want to read it and discuss what it has to say concerning the rapture. It is a text found in our Lord’s letter to the church of Philadelphia, and in the midst of it he says, “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth.” Notice

specifically the important statement, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth.

Now, this is a claim on the part of the pretribulationists for a pretribulation rapture of the church. For in this verse the Lord says through John the Apostle, because you have kept the word of my patience, I will keep you from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth. You will notice immediately from looking at this text that the hour of temptation that is to come which is going to test all who dwell upon the earth is a very general period of testing. And I do not know that there is any disagreement over the fact that the hour of temptation which tries all who dwell upon the earth—do not know of any disagreement over the meaning of this expression—that both posttribulationists, midtribulationists, and pretribulationists agree that this is a reference to the great tribulation period.

There is a book written in the past year or two by a personal friend of mine by the name of Robert Gundry. And Professor Gundry, who is a professor at Westmont College, is an espouser of the view of posttribulationism. And in his book he has his own exposition of Revelation chapter 3 and verse 10. He has pointed out in the book that which all students of the Greek text have known, that the expression, to keep thee from the hour of temptation, is an expression which means literally to keep thee out from the temptation which shall come upon all the world. And he has made a great deal over this, because he claims that this means, not that the church will be preserved out of the tribulation, but rather the church shall be preserved through the tribulation period.

And that the promise is that the Lord will preserve the church through the time of testing and not evacuate the church – to use his own word – evacuate the church before the tribulation begins. He lays a great deal of stress upon the word, from, which in Greek often means, out from. So that to keep out from might suggest that the church was in the tribulation but kept from it in the sense of preservation.

He also makes a great deal over the fact that the expression, to keep from, is found in only one other place in the New Testament and that is in John chapter 17 in verse 15, and in that text the Lord Jesus in his great Upper Room Discourse prayer, his high-priestly prayer, says, “I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.” And he points out that according to the text and prayer of our Lord, or he makes the claim, that this is a prayer that the believers would be kept from the evil one in the sense that they would be in the world but kept from his machinations.

And since that, according to Professor Gundry, is the meaning in chapter 17 verse 15 – a promise that while we are in the world we are kept from the evil one – using that same interpretation, that same force, we should understand Revelation chapter 3 verse 10 as to keep us from in the sense of we are in the tribulation but we shall be kept from the tribulation judgments.

He lays great stress upon the fact that the word, from, means “emergence from.” The word *ek* in Greek very often has that force, and no one will criticize Professor Gundry for making that point. It does mean, emergence, in many of its contexts. Professor Gundry also tried to point out or makes the claim that the prepositions, *en*, to keep in the tribulation, or *dia*, to keep through the tribulation, would not be so effective as the preposition *ek*, and that the word is chosen with a great deal of care, the intent being to indicate that the church is preserved through the tribulation period.

I think I would question Professor Gundry’s claims that the preposition, through, would not be more suitable for his view. If he had said that he would keep the church through the hour of testing which shall come all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth, then I would say that is precisely the meaning, but it is to be noted that in Revelation 3:10 the Lord does not say, I will keep thee *through* the hour of testing, but I will preserve thee *from* the hour of testing.

What can we say for the pretribulational view in the light of Professor Gundry’s claims? Well, in the first place, I think if we were to go back to John chapter 17 in verse 15 and ask ourselves what is it that the Lord Jesus is praying for the disciples, I think we would come to a different interpretation than that of Professor Gundry. It is his claim that the Lord Jesus is simply praying that we should be kept from Satan in the sense of we shall be in his hands or in his clutches or be exposed to his tests, but we shall be kept from them in the sense that we are preserved from his machinations.

I don’t really think that is what the Lord Jesus has in mind. He is not so much asking that we be kept from tests that might be given us by Satan or the temptations that might be proffered us by Satan. He rather is speaking about our eternal salvation. You will notice he says in the preceding verses, I have given them thy word and the world hath hated them because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world. He has said in verse 12 – I should have read this verse instead of that one – while I was with them in the world I kept them in Thy name those that thou hast given me I have kept and none of them is lost but the son of perdition that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

So the keeping that the Lord Jesus asks with reference to the believers is not the keeping from tests, but the keeping that has to do with eternal destiny. You will notice he says, I have lost none of them. I have kept them. None of them is lost but the son of perdition. So that the keeping is not the keeping of simple deliverance from tests, but what he is asking for is a keeping from apostasy. In other words, a moral and spiritual kind of keeping, and not a keeping that has reference to do that has reference to anything that is simply physical. So the reference is to moral and spiritual apostasy and therefore the keeping is absolute.

Now, the absolute nature of the keeping in Revelation chapter 3:10 is evident also because he says, that he prays that they should be kept from the hour of trial. And if *tereo ek*, that expression in John chapter 17 verse 15 means “to keep absolutely” and not simply “to preserve through trial,” then to keep absolutely is most fitting in Revelation

chapter 3 in verse 10, where we are told that he will keep us absolutely from the hour of testing.

Many commentators have also made the point that in Revelation chapter 3:10 what our Lord refers to is keeping from the hour of trial. He doesn’t say simply to keep from the trial, but keep from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth. And since the hour of trial is the time of the tribulation, there is no way in which a person could be kept from the hour of trial and be in the trial at the same time. So the stress upon the hour of trial argues for an absolute deliverance from the tribulation period. So I think then that what is referred to in Revelation chapter 3 verse 10 is not physical preservation through the tribulation period, but spiritual preservation in an effective and complete way. It’s the difference between being kept through something and kept in an out-from state.

Perhaps we could illustrate it in this way if we can say this is the tribulation to be kept through the tribulation period would mean that we would go into the tribulation period and come out on the other side. Now, there is a Greek word that means, through, and it is the Greek word *dia* or may be translated “through.” Now, if he were saying you are going to be in the tribulation and you are going to be taken out of it, then there is a Greek expression for “to take out” and that would involve the preposition *ek*, translated “from,” which is used here. I needn’t burden you with the Greek terms.

But now if we were to say, I want you to be kept in an out-from position – out from; here is out – if I want you to be kept in this position, then we are saying that a person will not go into the tribulation at all. He is kept outside of the tribulation. So to keep from or to keep out from, means that you are not going in at all. Not that you are going in and will be kept through it, but rather that you will not go in at all. So to be preserved out from suggests, it seems to me quite plainly, that the tribulation is a period of time that believers shall not enter at all. They shall be kept out from it.

I have often used an illustration—I don’t really know whether it’s totally convincing, but we have an expression that we use in athletics that might express the difference. If, for example, a coach of a football team were to say to an athlete who had been injured on the morning of a football game that was to be played, I am going to take you out of the game today, why that athlete would know that he was going to be in the game, but that at some point in the game the coach would probably feel it necessary because of his condition to take him out. So he would suit up for the game. But if the coach were to tell him on the morning of the game, I’m going to keep you out of the game today, he would know that it would not even be necessary for him to put on his uniform because he was not going to play.

Now, that is the force of the expression it seems to me, because you have kept the word of my patience, I am going to keep you out of the hour of testing which shall come upon the world, to try all those that dwell upon the earth. Incidentally, Professor Gundry’s book, which is an excellent book in some ways, although in other ways it is not, it has some arguments with which we pretribulationists will have to contend. In that book he has a very interesting view of the tribulation, and he has a very interesting view of the deliverance that comes from the tribulation. He does not feel that the tribulation period is really as tribulational as it is presented in the New Testament. You may remember that in Matthew chapter 24 it is stated by the Lord Jesus that the Great Tribulation is a period of time such as the world has never seen or ever will see.

Now, Professor Gundry says that the church is going to be preserved through that period of time. So what is involved in his interpretation is that that church is going to go into a tribulation period which is the worst that the world has ever seen or ever will see. So that, in effect, we have the church going through a tribulation which, according to his interpretation, is not really so tribulational at all and the deliverance that is promised the church at Philadelphia is not so great a deliverance, because we read in the rest of the

book of Revelation that the saints who are on the earth in those days are—many of them— martyred. Many of them suffer great persecution from the Beast.

So that the promise of preserving us through the tribulation period, according to Professor Gundry, is not such a great promise after all, because if the saints are there and if many of them are martyred and if many of them suffer persecution because of the Beast, what’s the meaning of the promise then, that he will keep us from the hour of testing which shall come to pass which shall try all the world? If many of us are going to lose our lives and if many of us are going to be persecuted, what’s the force of the promise? So I think it’s fair to say that Professor Gundry would have the church go through a tribulation that is not a tribulation and experience a deliverance that is not really a deliverance at all. Well, this is rather technical. I didn’t want to get too involved in it, but I’m sure someone will say to me afterwards, well Dr. Johnson, you didn’t say anything about some of those interpretations that have been placed on Revelations chapter 3 verse 10. [Laughter]

Now, we want to discuss the next great event in the prophetic word so far as the believer is concerned after the rapture of the church and of course it is the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. The Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ, and I want you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, and I hope you’ll listen as I read beginning at verse 5 through verse 17. 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 5 through verse 17. The Apostle writes,

“Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom he believed even as the Lord gave to every man. I have planted. Apollos watered. But God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planted anything, neither he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one, and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are laborers together with God. Ye are God’s cultivated field. Ye are God’s building, according to the grace of God which is given unto to me as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation and another

buildeth on it. But let every man take heed how he buildeth upon it. For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, every man’s work shall be made manifest for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire, and the fire shall test every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built upon it, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss. But he himself shall be saved yet as by fire. Know ye not that ye are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. If any man defile (the word that means something like destroy, corrupt) if any man corrupt the temple of God him shall God corrupt. For the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”

I think if we were to make some perceptive evaluations of the condition of evangelical Christianity today, most of us, if we compared evangelical Christianity with what is revealed in holy Scripture about the attitudes of Christians to the God who is their father in heaven, we would probably grant, we would probably come to the conclusion that the fear of God and the judgment of man are lost notes amid the festive, indolent, collection plate-passing Sabbatarianism of America.

We have lots of people who attend church on Sunday, and they go through the motions but the fear of God is largely lost from their services. And I’m not speaking simply of our liberal churches. Acquaintance with many of these liberal churches you have had—I would dare say that the majority of you in this room have been brought up in liberal churches. You know exactly what I am speaking about. We should not be surprised if the fear of God and the lost note of the judgment of men is lost from liberal churches who do not think of the Bible as the word of God or Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God, or that there is a God in heaven who judges at all.

The sad thing I think is that in our evangelical churches we have lost this note of the fear of God, and we have lost this note of a judgment of man. One of the reasons that Scottish Christianity was so strong for so many years was the fact that there was a rugged strength about Scottish Christianity, and even before the Reformation came to the Scots, they distinguished themselves by thinking of things *sub spectiae aeternitatis*, or “under the view of eternity.” They looked at things that way naturally.

They were more philosophical than the English, and because they were more philosophical than the English, they thought of ultimate questions more than the English did. And as a result, when the Reformation did come to Scotland, primarily though John Knox, the kind of Christianity that emerged in Scotland was a Christianity in which note of the fear of God and the judgment of God upon men, these notes were very prominent in Scottish Christianity, and it is as a result of this that they have given us the great theologians, whereas the English have had very few.

In our evangelical life in this country we have lost that sense. It’s my contention—I don’t think I’m wrong—it’s my contention that the home of our Lord Jesus Christ was a home which was characterized by the fear of God and by the note of the judgment of God upon man. C.S. Lewis has some comments concerning the family life of our Lord, and I want to read or try to say try to paraphrase what he says. He says, “That he was his mother’s own son. There is a kind of fierceness even a touch of Deborah mixed with sweetness in the *magnificat* to which most painted Madonnas do little justice, matching the frequent severity of his own things. I am sure the private life of the holy family was in many senses mild and gentle, but perhaps hardly in a way some hymn writers have in mind. One may suspect on proper occasions a certain astringency and all in what people at Jerusalem regarded as a rough north country dialect.” I think that he has caught the force of the *magnificat*. For if you read that *magnificat*, it is a marvelous expression of praise for the mercy and goodness of God to Israel, but at the same time there is that note

of astringency about it in which Mary lashes out against those that are living contrary to the truth of the Scriptures.

We today have a kind of God who is like a Sunday-afternoon dad reading the comics or a kind of progressive Kindergarten teacher. As a matter of fact, the kinds of Gods that we have generally reflect the kinds of political backgrounds that we have in our countries. For some countries who have an absolute monarch, God is looked at as an absolute monarch. In other countries who have forms of government such as we have, He is looked at as a kind of Democratic president, or if you don’t like the Democrats, he is a Republican who works in a bank, or he is a playground supervisor.

I think that probably the note that infects most of our evangelical circles is that God is a very good chum, a kind of friend that we all ought to think of as a friend and a person to whom of whom we should say that we like him. I’m not really sure that we should ever use the term, I like God. It is just not the proper term for the holy God of Scripture.

And I say, and I think I’m right in this, that what we need is a new idea of God. I’ve heard of a small girl who inquired of her parents what God looked like, and since they were theologically minded, they replied to her that God was a perfect substance. Now, unfortunately, to the little girl, a perfect substance suggested tapioca pudding, and since she detested tapioca pudding she grew up with a marked prejudice against God.

A lot depends on the conception that we have of God. He is a holy God, and he is a God who judges, and we should never forget it. I would think—and this is one thing that I pray about quite a bit. I would hope and pray that as a result of the ministry of the word of God to which we are all exposed there should come into our own lives a deeper note of the fear and reverence of our great and holy God, and also a sense of the awe that comes when we realize that we are dealing with a God who is going to judge all of us. He is going to judge the unsaved in a certain way, but he has a judgment ready for each one of us. And it is important that we live our lives with the full recognition of the

fact that we, everyone of us – believers, all of us believers, all of these believers right down here and right over here – one day you are going to stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

Both of these notes the fear of God and the judgment of God upon man come before us in the passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Even the Christian I say faces a judgment and he should fear in the light of it. In the tenth verse we read at the conclusion of that verse in the last sentence, “But let every man take heed how he builds upon the foundation of the Lord Jesus.” And then in verse 16, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”

Now, be clear on this point. Every believer in our Lord Jesus has been judged as a sinner at the cross of Jesus Christ, and our eternal destiny is not going to come in question at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. We are not going to be tested with respect to our salvation, judged with respect to our salvation at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. We are judged as sinners at the cross of the Lord Jesus and that judgment is over the moment that we come to faith in the Lord Jesus. We are delivered from the judgment of the penalty of our sins, past, present, and future, so that we are judged as sinners at the cross. We are judged as sons in this life. Believing in the Lord Jesus, we come to be sons of God.

Now, since we are in the family of God, we are judged as sons in this life. As a matter of fact, all of us are undergoing judgment as sons at the present time. Everyday we come under the discipline of the sonship that we enjoy. We may not feel it, but we have a Father in heaven who is observing all of our activities, all of them. He knows all of our thoughts. He knows all of the things that we do. He knows everything about our lives, and he has, he maintains constant supervision. He doesn’t have any special kind of television system that He can flip a switch and turn us on every now and then just to see how we’re doing to take a secret look at us. He sees us all, and he sees us completely and he sees us totally all the time. And he is disciplining us constantly. He never stops

his disciplining. It is always educational or correctional, and it’s going on all the time. Now, that’s a very sobering thought to realize that we are under his constant judgment.

Now, perhaps that disturbs you. Perhaps that makes you think that he is not a loving God. It’s just the opposite. He wouldn’t bother with someone who was not his son. He disciplines those who are his children, and he takes his fatherhood so seriously that he carries out his fatherly duties with the kind of perfection that I wish that my father had carried out in my life.

I do not neglect, regret in any way the discipline which my father gave me. He gave me some very interesting forms of discipline. I can still remember the razor strap. I can still remember the hairbrush, and I can still remember other forms of punishment which were just as effective. He was a very good father, and he disciplined me. I don’t want to say that’s the reason I turned out to be such a bright person as I am [laughter] because there are many things that he failed in because he was a human father. And I know that he was a great illustration for me, and I disciplined my children. I disciplined my son. I didn’t use the razor strap; we’ve passed out of that age. But I still use the hairbrush. I can still remember those cries of my children, I’m sorry, Daddy. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. They weren’t always sorry about what they had done, but they were sorry about what was happening to them at that particular moment [laughter]. And I think from looking at my children that it did produce some development and maturity in their lives.

Now, we have a heavenly Father who takes his sons very seriously. He has the greatest love and affection, and he knows exactly how to discipline us. He disciplines us knowing exactly what we can bear and he constantly disciplines. And I want to tell you, if you are thinking about becoming a Christian, sitting in this audience, wondering whether you ought to become a Christian, I want you to know that God takes sonship very seriously. And when you come into the family of God, you have a father who loves so much that he does discipline. So we are judged and sonned as sons in this life, and then we are going to be judged as servants at the judgment seat of Christ. And that is

what we read about here in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 5 through verse 17. Judged as sinners at the cross, judged as sons in this life, judged as servants at the judgment seat of Christ.

The apostle has been speaking about the causes of divisions and the church at Corinth. They have not understood the message he says, nor have you understood the ministry. And, first of all, I want you to realize the relationships that exist between the ministers in the church of Christ. He states in verse 5, who then is Paul and who is Apollos? Some of you have the idea that it is perfectly all right to be followers of Paul, to be followers of Cephas, to be followers of Apollos, and I want you to understand exactly what ministers are, what servants are.

Incidentally, the word that he uses for ministers is the word that is translated “deacons” when used in the technical sense. So a deacon is a minister. Now, it’s a word that really was associated with the word, dust, and so a deacon is a man in the local church appointed by the Holy Spirit who stirs up a lot of dust in service for God. It’s that kind of word.

Now, he speaks here of these ministers, Paul, Peter, Apollos, not as party leaders but as servants, as ministers in the sense that they are there to serve the church of God. Paul is not anything. Peter is not anything. Apollos is not anything. They are simply servants. They themselves are not responsible for spiritual growth. They work together under God. And the same is true in Believer’s Chapel. All who minister the word of God are simply ministers. They are nothing in themselves. And it is only a mark of carnality to say I am of one man or I am of another man or I am of still a third man. That’s only a mark of carnality. God has given us a number of ministers in the church of Jesus Christ, and these ministers of Jesus Christ in the church of Jesus Christ are not the ones who are responsible for the growth. The one responsible for the growth is God.

It’s like planting seeds in the garden. I may plant the seeds. You may come along and water. But neither one of us can make the seeds grow. Ultimately that is the work of

God. So the apostle, right at the beginning of the section, reminds the Corinthians of the true relationships that exist between the servants and under God. I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then he that plants is not anything, he that watereth is not anything but it’s God who gives the increase. That is something. And he says that these ministers shall receive his own reward according to his own labor.

Now, secondly he speaks about the responsibilities of the servants in verses 10 through 13, and his metaphor changes from agriculture to architecture. He speaks about an expert architect. He says in verse 10 according to the grace of God which is given unto me as a wise master builder, as an expert architect, I have laid the foundation and another builds on it, but let every man take heed how he builds upon it.

Now, you can see from this text, this tenth verse, that the apostle is not speaking about how to become a Son of God. He is not talking about believers and how they obtained spiritual life. He is talking about builders and the works that they perform. In other words, he is talking within the local church. He is talking about those who labor within the local church to build up the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, the first thing that he speaks about is the foundation in verses 10 and 11. And he says in the eleventh verse that the only foundation upon which a local church can be properly laid is our Lord Jesus himself. In ancient architecture, stability was the primary factor. That was the thing that all the architects were especially desirous to obtain, because the floods and other natural disasters frequently destroyed those works that had been made. And so they worked as much as they possibly could to obtain stability in their structure. And the apostle says the foundation for the church of Jesus Christ is the Lord Jesus.

This is the reason that there is so much ferment in the professing church today. It is because the foundation is not Jesus Christ in so many of our churches. He is the foundation of all spiritual life. Only in him is there forgiveness of sins. Only in Jesus Christ is there strength for present Christian living. And only in Jesus Christ is there hope

for the future. So there is only one foundation upon which a local church can be built and that is the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Now, in a church such a Believers Chapel or the church of which you may be a member, the foundation—the one foundation that will survive—is the foundation grounded in our Lord Jesus Christ and the preaching of the cross and the resurrection and the forgiveness of sins that comes through Him. And as long as we remain faithful to our foundation, the Lord Jesus, then we shall have a ministry.

Now, the apostle then moves on to speak of the superstructure in the twelfth verse. He says there are two kinds of teaching and there are two kinds of serving. Now, if any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble. There are gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble. These are the things that a person may build upon the foundation. Gold, silver, and precious stones were extremely valuable and for this reason the apostle uses them as a figure of the kind of building that is worthwhile. There is no flimsy superstructure in the building when one builds upon it gold, silver, and precious stones. Worth is the main idea because after all, at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, it is not how much you have done, but what kind of work you have done that matters. Notice the thirteenth verse, “Every man’s work shall be made manifest for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire and the fire shall test every man’s work of how much it is.”—no of what sort it is. So you see it is quality of work that counts, not quantity. It is not so much how large and how big our work is, it is what kind of work it is. Is it the kind of work that will stand the test of the judgment seat of Jesus Christ?

Now, I think that’s important. We all know the dangers of not constructing a building with proper quality. We were horrified on the street on which I live to discover about ten years ago that one of the houses on our street was built without subflooring. We should have known that something was strange was going on, because of all the houses on the street this was the strangest in its construction since the workers usually

came at night and worked on the building. We thought it was a little strange, but the rest of us were so busy we didn’t bother to go in and look until the house was finished.

And then afterwards somebody in the neighborhood said, have you heard about Mr.—I better not mention his name he might sue me but I don’t think he is in the country—have you heard about Mr. so and so who built those houses over there? There were two houses. One of them I don’t know about the other one whether it had subflooring or not, but we said, no. Well, the police or some government agency was out looking for him the other day and they’ve now found out that he has fled to Mexico. So he constructed a dwelling, put in no subflooring, managed to sell it, evidently, and then fled to Mexico. Whether he is back here or not, I don’t know. But nevertheless that was a very flimsy kind of superstructure to put on the foundation. I am afraid that a lot of the work done in the church of Jesus Christ is just as flimsy as a house built without subflooring.

So the Apostle speaks about gold, silver, precious stones. The secret of a good, effective, local church is the effective quality kind of work done by the mass of people who are carrying on the service of the Lord in the Sunday school, in the other activities that involve Christian servants, and especially in the lives of the individuals.

Now, then it is possible to build other forms of materials. Paul says it’s possible to build wood, hay, stubble. You know, Luther said that the Epistle of James was a *reibtstrobe* epistle. This is the text that he was thinking about when he made that comment. He was a student of Scripture, and he said in effect that James wrote us an Epistle but actually what it was is building straw on the one foundation of Jesus Christ. He did not have a very good opinion of the Epistle of James. The reason that he didn’t have a good opinion of the Epistle of James is because James, to him, did not understand the grace of God. Paul understood that we were saved by grace through faith and that not of ourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. But James is a person who came along and said faith without works is dead, and said that you

might have faith and still be lost, and that disturbed Luther, and so that’s why he called it a *reibtstrobe* epistle. And he said, in effect, Paul didn’t understand—that James didn’t understand the grace of God.

In fact, he went so far as to say if anybody can harmonize James and Paul he’d give him his doctor’s beret. And further, later on, he continued this throughout almost all of his life. He said up here at University of Brittenburg we have used the Epistle of James to fire our stove. [Laughter] So that was a *reibtstrobe* epistle so far as Martin Luther was concerned. Now, he was a very unique man. He loved the word of God. He had great understanding of the doctrine of grace. He just didn’t understand how to harmonize James and Paul, and he thought that James was a man who had built wood, hay, and stubble on the one foundation of the Lord Jesus.

Now, Paul speaks about the test of fire in the thirteenth verse. He says every man’s work shall be made manifest. Now notice it is every man’s work. That means that every one of us in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ shall have our work tested, every one of us.

Now, that is going to be a very interesting time. I don’t know—and I have a good friend who reacts very negatively to all of this—I don’t know really whether we shall all be sitting around in a giant amphitheatre and observing everyone as they are put to the test. I rather doubt that. I rather doubt that. It would be very embarrassing to think about having to have this test before the whole church of Jesus Christ. So probably that is not the way it’s going to happen. We are each going to be ushered in by ourselves no doubt. But we are going to have all of our work tested—every man, every one of us. So every man’s work shall be made manifest, for the day, the Day of Judgment, shall declare it because it shall be revealed by fire, and the fire shall test every man’s work of what sort it is.

Now, I have a good friend who told me many years ago right here in the city of Dallas that he had a dream about the judgment seat of Christ. I hope you don’t have a

dream tonight. But he had a dream he said, and he said he stood before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and the angel called out his name, and then some other angels went off on the side and they brought out a great mass of materials that represented his works and he said it was a giant pile. And then the Lord called on one of the angels to take a match and strike the match and to seek to set that giant pile on fire. And he said he was horrified.

He said there was giant blaze that went up to the skies like this. He said it was exactly like a fire in a haystack. If you’ve ever seen a fire in a haystack, there is a tremendous blaze and then it begins to sink like this. And he said he saw it, and he was terrified and horrified to see this giant mass sinking until finally he said there was just a little bit of ashes there. And then the Lord called on an angel to come out, and he had a little pan [laughter] and he went out and he swept up two or three little stones in this pan and brought them over before the Lord and that was all that was left of what he had done [more laughter].

Now, he was a preacher of the word and he said that that was that that was a dream that he actually had. Now, that is very funny of course, but it’s not funny to think about the fact that we are going to stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and all of our work is going to be judged.

Now, then, quality I say, is the important thing, of what sort it is, not how much it is. I think we are all going to be surprised at the judgment seat of Christ. I would imagine that you think that the great men who have preached the word are surely going to be the men to get the big rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. I don’t believe that at all. I do not believe that.

Now, I know in my case that is not so, and I know in the case of some others that it is not so. And I just have a general feeling that we are going to all be surprised. We are going to discover that some of those people that we did not even notice obtain great reward from the Lord because they have done in a very faithful way service that has

contributed to the building up of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. And many of those who have taught us the word of God and who have been on the platform are not going to get the rewards that we think that they’re going to get. Of what sort it is? Quality. Quality.

Now, quality work is work done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God. That is very hard to do work, quality work under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God out of faith and trust in Jesus Christ. That is very difficult. The apostle speaks of the rewards in verses 14 and 15. He says, “If any man’s work abide which he has built upon it,” he shall receive a reward. Incidentally, the reward is not described. That’s frustrating, isn’t it? That’s irritating. Why doesn’t he tell us what the reward is? Well, the reason he doesn’t tell us what the reward is is that we are not capable of understanding it at the present time. That’s the reason he doesn’t tell us what heaven is like. He only gives us that beautiful symbolic picture in the last chapters of the Book of Revelation. He doesn’t really tell us what heaven is like. Primarily, the Bible is a revelation of what heaven is not like. It’s not like things down here on the earth and the reward is not a corruptible thing. It’s not like anything down here on the earth, but he doesn’t tell us what it is.

Now, among the rewards, there are three kinds of builders. You notice there is no difference among sheep, but there is difference of among servants. And so he speaks about the wise builder and then he speaks about the unwise builder in verse 15, and then he speaks about the foolish builder. Let me try to briefly sum up here what is said. He states in verse 14, we’ve read, that if any man’s work abide which he hath upon it he shall receive a reward. Then he speaks about the unwise builder. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved yet as by fire. In other words, the picture is of a house being burned catching on fire, the flames shooting up to heaven, someone in the house just barely escaping by the skin of his teeth. That’s the picture that Paul paints when he says he shall suffer loss but he himself shall be saved so is by fire.

Vernon McGee used to like to say that many Christians are going to smell like they’ve been bought at a fire sale [laughter] at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. So that the person who has all of his works burned up but nevertheless he escapes by the skin of his teeth—incidentally that is not a reference to purgatory, he shall be save yet as by fire. It’s yet as through fire and so it’s the picture of a Christian who just manages to escape with his life.

Now, if you’ll turn over to the 4th chapter and the 5th verse, I need to give one or two of you comfort because some of you are looking very disturbed. You are wondering if you are going to have any kind of reward, and I want you to know that everybody’s going to have a little something there. In the 5th verse of the 4th chapter we read, “Therefore, judge nothing before the time until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts and then shall every man have praise of God.” So every one of you is going to have a little bit of reward at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. Because you see it’s necessary for us to have some evidence of our faith in Christ, and since if we do have faith in Christ – there is some evidence of it – all of us are going to have something at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. But some are going to be like Lot, and others are going to be like Abraham.

Now, then finally he speaks about the foolish builder. This person I think is not a Christian at all, but he’s a person who is in the professing church, because we read in verse 16, “Know ye not that ye are temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. (He’s talking about the local church). If any man corrupt the temple of God, him shall God corrupt for the temple of God is holy which temple ye are.” So the man who comes in with heretical teaching, teaching that is not Christian and seeks to lead astray the Church of Jesus Christ who corrupts the church with heretical teaching or who corrupts the church with heretical service, that man is going to be corrupted by God. So the man who ruins the building with heresy will himself be ruined because he outrages the heart of the gospel and of God.

I would think that this text has special reference to the great heretical teachers that have troubled the church of Jesus Christ in our Western world. Men like Harry Emerson Fosdick, who has been in the professing Christian church but has fed it and taught it nothing but heresy down through the years. That man is one of these foolish builders and he himself God will corrupt.

Well, this passage has extremely important application to the local church life. On the responsibility of the Sunday school teacher, the teacher of the little children, the teacher of the grammar school children, the teacher of the high school children, the teachers of the college and adults—all the responsibility of building upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. We shall answer for all of those words even those idle words that we have spoken in teaching the word of God. We are exhorted by Paul to take the things which have been taught us and to communicate them to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also.

One of the saddest things I think is a Sunday school teacher who comes to a Sunday school class unprepared when little children and young people are looking for some food upon which to grow. All the responsibility of all the gifted believers, the elders, the deacons, the helpers, the church secretary, the individuals responsible for the conduct of the baptismal services, the Lord’s table, the building committees, those who are in charge of the social affairs, the giving responsibilities that we all have, faithfulness, quality, these are the things that God looks for. Let’s close in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] We pray now thou blessing upon us in this meeting. May the ministry of the word of God glorify Thy name. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“The Order of the Alabaster Box” by S. Lewis Johnson
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