



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Judges 8:1-32

“The Backslider”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Judges chapter 8 is our Scripture reading for today as we look at the third and final chapter of the life of Gideon. We have, in the preceding chapters, listened and have read the story of how God called Gideon to the ministry to deliver the children of Israel from the hands of the Midianites. We have also read and studied the 7th chapter in which, by God's great power, Gideon was the instrumentality in the delivery of the children of Israel from one hundred and thirty-five thousand of the Midianites. The three hundred who lapped were able, by the power of God, to overcome the one hundred and thirty-five thousand of the enemy.

At the conclusion of the 7th chapter Gideon had sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim and asked the Ephraimites to come and aid them in the work of dispatching the rest of the enemy. One hundred and twenty thousand had been killed, but there were still fifteen thousand. And the three hundred, while they were faint, were still pursuing.

And so the story is picked up at the 8th chapter and the first verse when the men of Ephraim expressed some displeasure in the fact that Gideon had not called them to the task of defeating the enemy in the beginning. We read in verse 1 of chapter 8,

“Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they contended with him vigorously. But he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that. Then Gideon and the 300 who were with him came to the Jordan and crossed over, weary yet pursuing. And he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.” And the leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?” (They wanted to stand on the fence for awhile and be sure that they were on the side of the victors. And since Gideon had not yet won that final victory, they were not anxious to identify with him. That does not go too well with Gideon. As we read verse 7). And Gideon said, “All right, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.” And he went up from there to Penuel and spoke similarly to them; and the men of Penuel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered. So he spoke also to the men of Penuel, saying, “When I return safely, I will tear down this tower.” Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their armies with them, about 15,000 men, all who were left of the entire army of the sons of the east; for the fallen were 120,000 swordsmen. And Gideon went up by the way of those who lived in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting. When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army. Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. And he captured a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then the youth wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. And he came to

the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, concerning whom you taunted me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are weary?’” And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them. (That word disciplined is a word that many feel refers to a capital form of punishment. But the text does not specifically say that and so we perhaps should not go so far as to say it. It is evident that was a severe kind of dealing with the men of Succoth. Verse 17). And he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?” And they said, “They were like you, each one resembling the son of a king.” And he said, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if only you had let them live, I would not kill you.” So he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them.” But the youth did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a youth. Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise up yourself, and fall on us; for as the man, so is his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna (They wanted it to be done like an artist would do it. And Gideon satisfied them), and took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels’ necks. Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” But Gideon said to them (I want you to particularly notice this statement because it is one of the noblest statements that Gideon ever made and in fact that is made in this part of the Old Testament). Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.” Yet (The 24th verse in the New American Standard Bible from which I am reading this morning, the 24th verse begins with this adversity of conjunction, “yet.” And I think that’s a true rendering of the Hebrew *vav* at this point). Yet Gideon said to them, “I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil.” For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites. And they said, “We will surely give them.” So they spread out a garment, and

every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil. And the weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camels' necks. And Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and to his household. So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon. Then Jerubbaal (Remember that was the name of Gideon that his father gave him). Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. (Notice that statement also). And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal that is, Gideon in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.”

Perhaps it is well in the light of the fact that we are going to say some things that are just a little bit derogatory toward Gideon in his latter days that I read for you one verse in the New Testament in order that we may keep Gideon in proper perspective. We read in verse 32 of Hebrews chapter 11 in the great chapter on faith and the men of faith. It has been called the Westminster Abbey of faithful men. And in verse 32 of Hebrews 11 we read, “And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.” When all is said and done, Gideon was a man of faith. And we should remember that as we think about this

last chapter in which his faith for a time failed. Steve, we're delighted to have you.

Would you come and lead us in prayer?

The subject in this third and concluding study in the life of Gideon is the snare of Gideon. John Keble, who has written a number of good things, once wrote these sobering words, “The grey-haired saint may fail at last. The surest guide a wanderer prove; Death only binds us fast to the bright shore of love.” In the words of the Apostle Paul it is, “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” The pagans have said, “Count no man happy until he is dead.” Christians have said, “No man is secure against stumbling until in the presence of God.” We do say that men are secure, but they are not secure against stumbling. They are secure against falling away, but they are not secure against stumbling until in the presence of the Lord. It's a very sobering thing to realize that it is possible to be a faithful Christian man speaking in a very general sense, a faithful Christian man. Not that we are perfect ever. But then in the end of our lives stumble and fail.

Many years ago there was a Bible teacher, a British Bible teacher, whose books have charmed and blessed many readers down through the years. F.B. Meyer was one of the outstanding preachers of his day, one of the great Bible teachers. Anyone who has read much biblical literature will have sooner or later come across some of the books of F.B. Meyer, particularly his biographies of godly men in the Old Testament. Mr. Meyer preached for a number of years and then for an almost unexplainable reason fell into a period of decline and for nine years did not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who heard him said he didn't preach much of anything. He didn't deny the truth, but he didn't affirm the truth. And it was not until after a nine year period of time that he returned to the ministry that he had carried on for some time.

In the State of Texas, a few years back, there was an elder who was an elder in a very strong evangelical church. He was one of the leaders in that church. He heard some of the outstanding Bible teachers of the last generation. And after a period of time in

which he had been faithful to the word, his wife after a lingering illness died and then with a son in the ministry he married a woman who was not a Christian, again to drift away from the assemblies of the saints and spent his last few years without any testimony whatsoever, outwardly at least having abandoned the faith that he pursued and practiced for so long.

The last chapter of Gideon’s life is tainted with failure. And it points us to the third of the great lessons from the life of Gideon. I think the first lesson from the first chapter of the life of Gideon is the fact that God does not call the wise, the mighty, the noble to ministry. He often calls those who seem to be nothing. But he does call them. And while Gideon was, so far as we can tell, just an ordinary man who spent his time threshing out a few grains of wheat by the wine press, hiding from the Midianites, God nevertheless laid his hand upon him and called him to the ministry of deliverance of the children of Israel from the Midianites.

Now he called him. And he gave Gideon a personal relationship with the Lord. That lesson, I think appears from the 6th chapter of the Book of Judges. And in the 7th chapter last week we saw that we have a wonderful illustration of the truth. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord.” As Gideon and three hundred men who lapped were able to overcome and destroy an army that was four hundred and fifty times as large as theirs from odds that were terribly against him, God enlarged those odds to odds of four hundred and fifty to one and then gave the victory to Gideon and his little band in order that men may realize that it is the Lord who delivers.

Now the lesson of this chapter is the lesson of Revelation chapter 2 and verse 4, in which our Lord Jesus, speaking to the church at Ephesus which in the days of Paul was known for its “love toward God and love toward all the saints,” to use Paul’s expression in Ephesians chapter 1. But in Revelation chapter 2 in the letter that Jesus Christ wrote to that church he said after commending them, “But you have left your first love.” He did not say they had lost it, but they have left it. And in Gideon’s last days it is clear that

there was a failure in his life which in itself should be a tremendous admonition for each one of us.

I was tempted to call the sermon, “Gideon, the Ephraimites, the Midianites and the termites,” [Laughter] because we do see something that is analogous to the operation of termites and the life of Gideon. I have lots of friends who are members of the Christian organization called the Gideons who do such a very commendable work of putting Bibles in places such as motels and hotels and other public buildings for people to read and through whose work God has blessed many people. Sometimes with the Gideons when I know them well enough I will ask them, “Do you Gideons follow Gideon in Gideon’s activities in Judges chapter 6 and chapter 7 or in chapter 8?” And almost invariably a puzzled look comes over their faces because they exhort us all the time to read the Bible and they’re right about that. And we don’t read the Bible as much as we do. But they are men of like passions or failings with us. And they frequently have not realized that in the 8th chapter of the Book of Judges we have a significant failure in Gideon.

Well, let me just briefly speak about the first part of the chapter and then center our attention upon what we have in the latter part of the section. In the opening verses after Gideon has been engaged in the activity of defeating the Midianites, operation mop up is going on. And the three hundred are pursuing the remaining fifteen thousand who have not been slain. The gleaning that is referred to in verse 1 or verse 2 and the vintage is a reference to the little bit, so far as numbers were concerned, that the Ephraimites had done and the large amount of slaughter that had been the work of Gideon and his men.

Now remember that after the battle was really won, Ephraim came into the fray and they captured the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And they killed those two leaders. And that’s what Gideon is speaking about when after they come to him and say, “What’s this that you have done to us in not calling us to go out to fight against Midian with you?” He says, “Why, what I’ve done, what it is in comparison with what you have done? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?”

In other words, have you not done more in the slaughter of the two leaders than we have in the slaughter of the one hundred and twenty thousand?

Now that is a reply that beautifully illustrates a passage in Proverbs chapter 15 and verse 1, in which in that proverb we are told, “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but harsh words stir up anger.”

Now there is no better illustration of that than Gideon’s reply when they say, “Why didn’t you call us to fight with you?” He says, “Why, you’ve done more than we have. You’ve taken the leaders. And your gleaning is far more than our vintage.” And we read that the Ephraimites’ anger toward him subsided when he said that.

Now, then in the next section we have the incident in which Gideon passes over as he follows the armies to the east, he passes over the Jordan. He comes to the leaders of the village of Succoth and he asks them for some bread for the men who are traveling with him. In other words, he calls upon them to identify themselves with what God is doing. And they in effect say to him, “We don’t want to identify ourselves with you until we know that you’re going to get the victory. Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?” And Gideon, so upset over this, says that when he comes back he’s going to have to discipline them. And speaking also to the men of Penuel, he said that when he comes back he’s going to tear down their tower.

There is an important lesson here too, I think. And it’s the lesson of the importance of cooperating with the things that God is doing. There is no neutrality possible in the things of the Lord. We are either with him and what he is doing or we are against him and what he is doing. You cannot be neutral in the things of God. You cannot be neutral toward the person of Jesus Christ. You cannot be neutral toward Christianity. You are either for the truth of God or you are against it.

One of the things that makes this so, is that Christianity is so exclusive in its claims. You cannot say, “I will believe in Christ and I also will believe in the gods of the heathen.” You cannot in that say that you are accepting Christianity too. Because, you

see, Christianity makes the claim to be exclusive. The Lord Jesus does not say that he is a savior; he says he is the Savior. He does not say that he is a way; he says he is the way. So we cannot accept more than one way and acknowledge Christianity. Christianity in its claims is exclusive and a person must take his stand. It is impossible to be neutral. We cannot say and be true to Christ, "Well, we believe in going to heaven through Christ." Others believe in going to heaven through the church or through other means. And we're all going to go to heaven. In so doing, we deny Christianity. We deny Christ. We deny the atonement. We deny all of the truths of the word of God. It is only ignorance of biblical truth that would lead a person to say something like that. And the same thing is true in the work of God. We either are with God and what he is doing or we are against him. It is impossible to be neutral. So the men of Succoth must be taught that lesson, the men of Penuel as well.

There is a verse in the prophecy of Hosea that I think relates to this. It is the verse in which the Lord says through Hosea the Prophet, "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone." That verse incidently has been misunderstood. And one of the commentators in explaining this verse has pointed out that expositors of the Bible have a habit like sheep of going in flocks. And sometimes it is said of them, maybe said of them, "All we like sheep have gone astray." That is unfortunately true. That text, "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone," does not mean that God is against Ephraim. Later on in that same prophecy he will say, "How shall I give thee up, oh Ephraim?" When he says, "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone," he's speaking to Judah. And he's saying to Judah, "Now, Ephraim or Israel is in idolatry. And you, Judah, you leave Ephraim alone." He's calling upon Judah to separate themselves from Ephraim in their idolatry. In other words, separation may be necessary if there is idolatry and disobedience. Turning this around, if there is obedience and faithfulness to the word of God then we must identify ourselves with faithfulness to the word of God regardless of what the issues may be.

Well now we turn to the last part of the story in the 8th chapter here and take a look at the end of Gideon’s life. We have here a noble stand and a sad fall. Will you look at verse 22 and verse 23? Gideon now has won his victory. “And the men of Israel say to Gideon, ‘Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.’” The children of Israel are so buoyed up by the remarkable achievement of General Gideon that they offer him not only a monarchy, but a hereditary monarchy. They say to Gideon, “You be our king. And furthermore, after you are gone your son, let him be our king, and when he’s gone, your grandson, your son’s son.” So they’re offering him a hereditary monarchy.

Now that was an amazing recognition of the worth of Gideon in their eyes. They did not offer Moses that. They did not offer Joshua that. Many other great men have never been offered this. We didn’t offer Washington this. And down through history men who have been delivered by others have not offered them what the children of Israel have offered Gideon. It was a remarkable expression of appreciation for what Gideon has done, to offer him a hereditary monarchy. But listen; look at that for a moment. What are they really saying?

Now remember the children of Israel had been told by God in the revelation that he had given them up to this point that it was Yahweh, or Jehovah, who was their king. It was never God’s intention from the standpoint of his preceptive will that Israel should have a king. From the standpoint of his decretive will, it was. Hidden in the counsels of ages past was the fact that Israel would have a monarchy and David would sit upon that throne. And Solomon would sit upon that throne. And they were in their office as king, illustrative, typical of the coming king, the Lord Jesus Christ. But God was the King of Israel. And he never gave them direct instructions to have a king. They came to him and said, “We want a king like the nations around us.” They were dissatisfied with the fact that they had no king. The other nations had a man to whom they could point and they would say to this visible man, “That’s our king.” But Israel, they could not point to any

visible king. They could not point to Moses. They could not point to Joshua. They could not point to anyone and say, “He is our king.” And so ultimately they came complaining and God gave them a king, King Saul. But it was not his preceptive will that Israel have a king. Why? Because God was their king. He wanted that testimony to be faithfully given by the children of Israel. We are not under a visible head. We are serving an invisible, infinite and eternal God. He is our head.

Well, then I think I can understand now why some people say that this answer that Gideon gave is one of the noblest statements in all of the word of God. For we read in verse 23 that he said in response to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.”

Now there is a tendency in Christianity in my opinion for us to always fall into this era of substituting the headship, for the headship of Jesus Christ, human headship. It is a natural thing. When you speak to someone and say, “Who is the head of the church?” Well, it’s embarrassing to some people to say, “The Lord is the head of the church,” because they say, “But I mean who’s the human head. Who’s the fellow who really is running things?” “Well, it’s the Lord.” “No, I mean.” And so we say, “Why, it would be nice if we had a visible head.” If we had a visible head we could answer all of these embarrassing questions that are asked us. The early church fell into this.

Do you know that within twenty years after the time of the writing of the last book of the New Testament one of the famous apostolic fathers, his name was Ignatius, around 110 to 112 AD wrote words like this? To the Smyrnaeans, he wrote incidently a number of letters to churches. We have about seven of them. And in the letter to the Smyrnaeans, the church at Smyrna, he wrote these words. Listen to them and see if they sound like the New Testament. “See that you all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as if it were the apostles (In other words, regard the bishop as if he were the father. Look at the presbytery and regard it as if they were the apostles); and reverence the deacons, as the command of God. Let no one do any of the things

appertaining to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Lord's Supper or Eucharist, which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints.” Do you know what that means? That means that we should never observe the Lord's Supper if we do not have someone to officiate at the table who has been appointed for officiating at the table of the Lord. Now that is very nice. There are many, many churches that practice that as a doctrine today. You must have an ordained man by the side of the Lord's Table in order to have an official remembrance of our Lord.

Now if you ask, “Where is that found in the Bible?” Well, someone might say, “That's unfair.” No, it's not unfair. Where is it found in the Bible? It's absent from the Bible. Furthermore, he goes on to say, “Wherever the bishop appears, let the congregation be present (In other words, if the bishop's there, there you have a congregation of the Lord); just as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Universal Church. It is not lawful either to baptize or to hold an agape, a Lord's Supper, without the bishop; but whatever he approve, this is also pleasing to God, that everything which you do may be secure and valid.” Writing to the Ephesian church he said, “Therefore it is clear that we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself.” Amazing thing. But out of this has arisen the monarchical bishop or the Episcopal system. It is not found in holy Scripture. Many who practice it and follow it admit it is not found in the word of God. But by practicing it we do have a visible head and so when they say to us, “Who is your head?” We can say, “Bishop so and so.” Or we can say, “We have one man whom we call the pastor. He is the organization of head of the church and his name is.”

Gideon's statement is a remarkable statement, “The LORD shall rule over you.” For you see, the Bible says the head of the church is Christ. He is our head. The one thing that I would desire in Believers Chapel is that we recognize that Christ is the head of the church. The elders are simply under shepherds, under him. True, government has been committed to the elders, in so far as they follow the teaching of the word of God. But our head, our leader in our local church is our Lord Jesus Christ himself. And we

shall succeed and prosper. We shall do the will of God. We shall be useful and pleasing to him in so far as we follow the guidance of our head, the Lord Jesus. He is the head and he has never resigned his office. We cannot take it away from him. It's his.

Wouldn't it be a great thing if we truly recognized him as head? Incidentally, that's why we meet on Sunday night and we observe the table of the Lord. And we also baptize as we shall tonight in the meeting with the Lord Jesus as the head superintending the meetings of the body and the life of the body. That is the biblical ecclesiology taught in the New Testament. “The Lord shall rule over you.” Why do we want a man? Why do we want a human leader when we have a divine leader? Are we dissatisfied with the Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us? Are we not pleased with the blood that was shed on Calvary's cross for our sins? Is it a difficulty for us to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Would we rather follow the guidance of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.? God forbid. [Laughter] Me genoito, to use the apostles expressions. Why is it that we as human beings are dissatisfied with the things that God has given us? He has given us himself as our guide, as our leader, as our head. We do not need any human guide, any human leader, any human head. We have the greatest head that the church could possibly have. We need his word, to hear his voice as the spirit uses it in our lives. We are to be submissive to the Scriptures. Let them be our final standard of faith and practice. And following them we shall please our head and be fruitful for him.

Now then, I say that was one of the noblest incidents in the history of Israel because it isn't long after this before Israel abandons this principle and sets up Saul as their head.

Now Gideon – that's the climax of Gideon's life, it seems to me. That's really the last and final expression of the faith of Gideon. And the first word of verse 24 represents the downfall. “Yet Gideon said to them, “I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil.” That request leads to Gideon's downfall. The exact nature of the ephod is not given us. The ephod, remember was something worn by the high

priest in Israel. It was part of his official garments in which he carried out his priestly ministry. It is possible and many of the students of this particular passage feel that it is true that Gideon took an idol and on that idol made of wood or stone put the ephod which was made. And thus set up a form of worship in Ophrah of the Abiezrites that was false to the revelation that God had given to them. That may well be true. We know that the ephod in the Old Testament was often an object of worship. We have two other references in the Book of Judges later on in chapter 17 and in chapter 18 which suggests that. And we know that on the ephod were the Urim and Thummim. And they were means for the ascertaining of the will of God. So it does seem that it is possible that Gideon made an idol and set it up in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. And it became a snare to him.

You know God tries us in two different ways. He tries us often by affliction. And if our faith is not grounded in the word of God and in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus in the midst of afflictions, our faith fails. Affliction is a great means of strengthening our faith because it's like the storms and the tempests and the effects they have upon the trees causing them to sink their roots down deeper into the ground. Affliction is one of God's great ways of strengthening our faith. We should never, never react against the afflictions that come to us. They are designed to deepen us, strengthen us, to make us more useful to the Lord. But there's another way he tests us. And it's more difficult for us to handle this. He often tests us in our prosperity. When things are going wonderfully the tendency is to turn away from the Lord, to give ourselves to the pleasing of self.

And evidently prosperity not affliction was the occasion for Gideon's falling. He wanted to secure his position by means of the ephod so that the people would come to Ophrah of the Abiezrites and carry out some form of worship there. In verse 27 we read, "And Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and to his household."

Because you see what he did was to set up evidently a worship that was contrary to the worship being practiced in Israel at that time. Where was the tabernacle? Where was the worship of Israel carried on at this time? At this time, it was carried on in Shiloh. It was there that the tabernacle existed. It was there that the priests were. It was there that their priestly ministry was carried out. It was there that the sacrifices were offered. It was there that Israel was to be taught by means of those sacrifices given in the Mosaic Law about the redeemer that was to come. It was there that they offered bird offerings and sin offerings and trespass offerings and peace offerings and meal offerings. All of those offerings that adumbrated the Lord Jesus Christ's coming and illustrated for them that atonement comes through the shedding of blood. Forgiveness of sins comes through a sacrifice. And in the priestly service and in all of the sacrifices, Israel was being prepared for the coming of Christ. What was Gideon doing? By means of his great influence, he was setting up a rival worship in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. And he was calling men to the worship or adoration or reverencing of an ephod that did not have any sacrifices associated with it. It did not have any priesthood associated with it that had the authority of God behind it. Gideon was a splendid soldier and a great leader, but he was a false priest of God. It was a vile thing that he did, really.

Religious inventions are the worst inventions of all because they ultimately have to do with the eternal destiny of men. It may seem to be a small thing. You who've been listening to me preach through Galatians recently will understand what I'm saying. It may seem to be a very small thing to add. If a man believes in Jesus Christ and is baptized, then he may become saved. It may seem a very small thing to add one little thing to the grace of the gospel in Jesus Christ. But in that addition, the grace of the gospel is destroyed in principle. And so don't you see that what we have here is a religious invention that is ultimately destructive of the life, the spiritual life of individuals. Clerisy, the idea that some men have certain privileges that other men do not have in the observance of the worship of the saints, the idea that we must have an ordained man to

serve the Lord 's table, the idea that we must have an ordained man to baptize individuals in water. A simple reading of the Bible, it would seem, would do away with all of that false doctrine.

So finally Israel, they came to the pleasure giving ephod, someone has said, rather than God's penitential ephod and priesthood that existed in Shiloh. What was the result? Well, we read in verse 30, “Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and named him Abimelech.” And then we read in the 9th chapter that Abimelech is the one who slew all of his brethren with the exception of one. So what do we have in Gideon's latter days? It would seem that Gideon who went to live in his own house and had the many wives and the many children in the midst of his own family there arose up individuals, immoral, rebellious against the word of God, becoming a member of the affluent society. He left Israel almost exactly as Israel was when God used him to deliver them from Midian. Listen to verse 33. “Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god.” A little yielding, a little innovating, a little sailing close to the wind, a little well meant scheming. But the result is disaster in the people of God.

You know my dear Christian friends, it is great to begin well in the Christian life, but it is important that we also finish well. It is great to begin well as a Christian church; it is important that we also finish well as a Christian church. Gideon's life illustrates the peril of unconscious decay. Isn't that a striking text that Hosea writes? “Gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he (Ephraim) knoweth it not.” What a beautiful picture. “Gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth it not.”

We all have known men who have carried on ministry for our God that was fruitful, acceptable. It would seem blessed by God and then sin came. And often the ministry wrecked. I remember one young man, a very effective preacher of the word of God in a city in the South, had a very effective ministry in a city that had very little

ministry. But due to scandal, and evidently true scandal, his ministry was wrecked. Today he does not preach the word of God at all. There was another elder in a southern city. Not only an elder who knew the word of God, but who was also a very effective teacher of the word of God, and then sinned, the sin of homosexuality, and then a wrecked ministry for many, many years. There was another young man whose ministry was known over several states for many years, very effective, and then the sin came, the snare, and the result, catastrophe, over and over again.

This is one of the facts of Christian life. It makes you want to get down on your knees and say, "Oh God, may this not happen to me." But secret failure is always the antecedent of public failure. "Gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth it not." One of the saddest things in the world is to drift from the things of God and not know it, to not realize that we really have drifted from the things of God. The things of Jesus Christ are not as fresh and vital and significant to us as they were in the first days of our new found faith. "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love," we often sing. Thou hast left thy first love. Oh my dear Christian friends in Believers Chapel. May it never be said by our Lord concerning you that you have left your first love. May God give you a deep determination down within to remain in that relationship to him that means vitality and true Christian joy and fruitfulness. And may this assembly of saints have that experience as a body.

The pope said Luther, who was one of these fanatics, "Luther ought to be in bedlam." Many others said about the Wesleys that the Wesleys were madmen. The Wesleys replied, "Fools and madmen let us be, Yet is our sure trust in Thee." It would be great if all the people in Dallas said, "Those people that go out to Believers Chapel, they're mad, mad about Christ, mad about the doctrines of the word of God, mad about the principle of grace, mad about seeing people one for Christ." That's alright. Let them say it. Do you know what they said of Paul? They said he was mad. That's exactly what they said. Read 2 Corinthians chapter 5. He says, "We're not beside ourselves." That's

what they're saying. Do you know what they said of the Lord Jesus? They said he was mad. So as far as I'm concerned I'll stand in that succession. Let me be mad. Let me be said to be mad for the gospel of Christ, mad for the grace of God, mad for the preaching of the atonement of Christ, mad for the shedding of the precious blood, mad for the necessity of lost men being saved through Christ for salvation. And I'll be happy.

Now for those of us who are genuine Christians, but who have been drifting, the Prophet Jeremiah says to people who were of like mind, “Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backsliding.” And then the prophet answers for them. He says, “Behold we come to Thee for Thou art the LORD our God.” So may God help you. If you're a Christian, may God help you to say, “Oh God, I have been drifting from Thee. I have become indifferent to the things of the Lord. Gray hairs have begun to appear. I see them. But I returned. Heal my backsliding.”

And if you're not a Christian at all, we ask you to look off to the cross where Christ shed his blood for sinners and come to him and receive the forgiveness of sins that comes by free grace. May God help you to come to him. May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] We thank Thee, Lord, for the lessons that have come to us from the life of this great man, Gideon. We thank Thee for the way Thou didst use him. And we thank Thee for that noble stand, “The LORD shall rule over you.” Oh God, may that be true of this assembly and of the whole church of Jesus Christ. And if, Lord, there is within our lives that which is displeasing to Thee, which represents indifference and lethargy and drifting, oh God, enable us by Thy grace to cleave to Thee. Heal our backsliding. Thou art the Lord our God through Jesus Christ. For the lost, we pray for them that they may come to know him whom to know his life eternal. May grace, mercy and peace be with us now and forever. Amen.