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THE DANGER OF DRIFTING SPIRITUALLY

Hebrews 2:1-4

By

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December 7, 2003

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Hebrews Lesson 4

The Danger of Drifting Spiritually Hebrews 2:1-4

I read recently that the Tour de France bicycle champion, Lance Armstrong, and his wife are divorcing. The article stated that at this point, he does not have another woman in his life. Rather, his many hours spent pursuing his bicycle career have left no time for his marriage.

I would predict that 25 years from now, Armstrong will look back at his life and say, "I was a fool to sacrifice my family for my sport!" But at this point, the fame and fortune are blinding him to the more satisfying value of a lasting, loving marriage relationship.

It's easy in life to get caught up in matters that seem very important at the time, but in the light of eternity will shrink into oblivion. Because we all have only so many hours in our day, our focus on these seemingly important matters also means that we neglect matters that are huge in light of eternity. When these things nag at our consciences, as invariably they do, we justify our current priorities by saying, "Someday I will attend to these eternally important matters, but right now, I'm too busy." But such procrastination can be eternally fatal!

The one sure fact of human existence is death. As George Bernard Shaw observed, "The statistics on death are quite impressive: one out of one people die!" Since we all have to face death, you would think that we all would live in view of eternity, but we don't. Other pressing matters come up to divert our attention: "I've got to get through school." "I've got to get established in my career." "I've got to get the kids raised, and then I'll have some time." Many of these pressing matters are good and important, but they easily can crowd out the most important thing. As a result, even we who know the truth of the gospel are always in danger of drifting spiritually.

The author of Hebrews has spent the first chapter extolling the supremacy of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. He has not mentioned a word of application or exhortation to this point.

But now, as a concerned pastor, he pauses in his argument to apply what he has written. Our text is the first of five warning sections in this letter. These warnings are addressed to professing Christians who were in the church. By using the first person plural pronoun, "we," the author identifies himself with his readers. He faced the same temptations that they faced. He was not in an ivory tower, exempt from these pitfalls. Like every faithful pastor, he was exhorting himself first, even as he exhorted his congregation.

The danger that he was confronting was this: *You are either drifting with regard to your salvation because of neglect, or you are growing because of deliberate effort and attention.* But *nobody* grows by accident.

Since we have encountered such a great salvation,
we must be careful not to drift away from it.

There are three main points:

1. The salvation Christ offers is indescribably great.

He calls it "so great a salvation" (2:3). He gives us four reasons that this salvation is indescribably great.

- A. Salvation is great because it is the one thing that every person needs more than anything else.

In church circles we toss around the word "salvation" so often that it loses its true meaning. But verse 3 contains another word to alert us to the significance of the concept: "escape." "How shall we escape...?" An escape points to a situation of great peril. You don't need to be saved unless you are in grave danger of perishing. Our soldiers in Iraq rescued Jessica Lynch from hostile enemies. They *saved* her so that she *escaped* further torture and perhaps death.

Outside of Jesus Christ, every sinner (that is, every person, since all have sinned) is under God's just condemnation. Breaking God's holy law incurs a just penalty (2:2), namely, eternal separation from God in hell. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). God's wrath abides on the one who does not obey Jesus Christ (John 3:36). As Jonathan Edwards pictured it in his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," every sinner is like a spider dangling by a thread over a fire. Only God's mercy keeps us from falling into the eternal flames.

Salvation does not mean, as one popular TV preacher put it, "to be changed from a negative to a positive self image" (Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* [Word], p. 68). Salvation does not mean that Jesus helps you fulfill your dreams. Salvation is not about Jesus improving your marriage or giving you peace and joy. God's salvation isn't a nice thing to round out your otherwise successful and happy life. Salvation is about Jesus rescuing you from the wrath to come! And since every person is in imminent danger of facing that wrath, salvation is every person's greatest need!

- B. Salvation is great because it comes to us from none other than the Lord Jesus Himself.

"For this reason" (2:1) points back to chapter 1, where the author has extolled the supremacy of Jesus, God's eternal Son. He is God's final word to us, the heir of all things, and the creator of the universe. He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature. He upholds all things by the word of His power. He made purification for sins and now sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high (1:2-3). He is far superior to the angels, who worship and serve Him (1:4-14). "For *this* reason," because Jesus is the glorious Son of God who went to the cross to secure your purification from sin, your salvation is indescribably great.

As I said, there is not a word of application in chapter 1. Rather, chapter 1 sets forth the doctrine of the exalted Person of Jesus Christ in relation to the Father and to the angels. It is only after the author has set forth this doctrine that he gives this first exhortation. Sound doctrine must always be the foundation for practical application.

And yet we live in a day when many pastors are minimizing doctrine. I've heard things like, "Doctrine is divisive." Or, "People don't need theology or biblical content. They need to know how to get along in their marriages and how to deal with life's problems." So pastors are giving sermons (if you could even call them that!) that are devoid of doctrine. Frankly, many such sermons could easily appear in *Reader's Digest* without much modification!

But our author wants us to see the connection between the great doctrines about Christ in chapter 1 and his exhortation here:

“For this reason...” (2:1). Our salvation is indescribably great because it comes to us from none other than the eternal Son of God who left the Majesty on high to become the sacrifice for our sins. He announced this good news during His earthly ministry (2:3). His teaching shows us the way to be reconciled to God. Having offered Himself for our sins and rising from the dead, He is now back at the right hand of God, awaiting the time when His enemies become His footstool (1:13). How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation!

C. Salvation is great because eyewitnesses confirmed it as true.

Salvation is only great if it is true. If it's just someone's fanciful idea, with no factual basis, it may be nice, but it certainly isn't worth suffering the loss of your property or shedding your blood for (10:34; 12:4). This great salvation was not only “at the first spoken through the Lord,” but also “it was confirmed to us by those who heard” (2:3). That statement seems to place the author, along with his readers, in the category of those who did not hear the gospel directly from Jesus Christ, which would exclude Paul from being the author. Those who hold to Pauline authorship say that this is just an editorial “us.” But whoever he was, the point is the gospel that Jesus proclaimed comes to us from those who directly witnessed His earthly ministry.

The gospel is not the best ideas of a bunch of religious philosophers speculating about how they think we can be reconciled to God. The gospel is a matter of revelation and historical fact. Jesus really lived. His teaching and miracles are truthfully recorded in the gospels. He died on the cross and was raised physically from the grave before He ascended bodily into heaven. Many eyewitnesses saw these things and recorded them for us. If they were fictional stories, those in that day who read these accounts would have laughed the apostles out of town. But rather, these witnesses held to the truth about Jesus, even when cost them their lives.

D. Salvation is great because God Himself confirmed the message by miracles through the apostles.

God testifies through these witnesses “by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to

His will" (2:4). He is referring to the miracles performed mostly by the apostles as recorded in the Book of Acts. The terms, "signs, wonders, and miracles" are basically synonymous, but have different nuances. *Signs* point to the fact that miracles have spiritual significance. When a lame man is healed or a dead man is raised, it points to something beyond the bare fact. These are pictures of how God powerfully acts to save souls. *Wonders* emphasize the human response of awe and amazement when we witness God doing the humanly impossible. *Various* (= "manifold" or "many-colored") *miracles* (= Greek, *dynamis*) focus on God's power displayed in numerous ways.

Gifts [lit., distributions] *of the Holy Spirit* are given "according to His will." This emphasizes God's sovereignty in bestowing spiritual gifts as He sees fit for His purposes (1 Cor. 12:11). As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12, not everyone has the same gifts, but as in the human body, so in the body of Christ each member has a vital function for the overall health of the body.

Many claim that the church should receive and exercise the miraculous gifts (miracles, healings, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, word of knowledge, and prophecy) to the same extent as the early church did. Others argue that such gifts entirely ceased with the close of the New Testament canon. It seems to me that those who emphasize such gifts overlook God's purpose for them. He gave these gifts to confirm the gospel. If you study miracles in the Bible, you will find that they are not uniformly distributed. They occur in clusters at critical times in history.

It would seem that these gifts had diminished by the time Hebrews was written. Otherwise the author would not have referred to the miracles done by the apostles. Rather he would have called attention to the ongoing phenomena in their midst, which would have strengthened his point. Even in Paul's ministry, there seems to be a chronological tapering off of such miracles. In Acts 19, even handkerchiefs carried from Paul to those who were sick brought healing. But at the end of his life, he didn't tell Timothy to claim healing for his stomach problems by faith, or to wait until the handkerchief arrived. He told him to drink a little wine (in modern terms, "take your medicine"; 1 Tim. 5:23). Paul didn't heal Trophimus, but left him sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20).

So it would seem that these miraculous gifts are not God's normal way of operating in this era. But we should not restrict His ability to perform miracles if it is His sovereign will. With regard to speaking in tongues, Scripture clearly teaches that the genuine gift is miraculously speaking in an unlearned foreign language. It definitely is *not* jabbering in nonsense syllables! That fact alone eliminates about 99 percent of what goes under the guise of speaking in tongues in our day. Paul gives a number of other guidelines that should govern the practice of this gift, but which most charismatic churches ignore (1 Cor. 14:27-34).

To sum up the first point: because every person desperately needs salvation, because it comes to us from none other than God's exalted Son, because it was confirmed to us as true from those who were with Jesus, and because God confirmed their testimony through miracles, it is indescribably great.

2. Because God's salvation is so great, the consequences of neglecting it are terrible.

The author does not specify here what we would face if we neglect this salvation. But all we have to do is read ahead (10:27), where he gets more graphic: If we don't escape, we face "a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries" (see also 12:25-29). Some may be thinking, "How can these frightening warnings apply to Christians? Aren't believers eternally secure?"

One of the mistaken ideas that the author of Hebrews confronts in this and in every other warning section is what we could call "the myth of the carnal Christian." This idea was popularized by Lewis Sperry Chafer's *He That is Spiritual* [Dunham] and by the *Schofield Reference Bible* (note on 1 Cor. 2:14) early in the 20th century. It was later picked up by Campus Crusade's booklet, "How to Be Filled With the Holy Spirit." The idea is that there are three classes of people: the natural man (unbeliever); the spiritual man (the Spirit-filled believer); and, the carnal man (the believer who is running his own life, not subject to the Holy Spirit). For the sake of time, I cannot go into many of the problems with this classification (see Ernest Reisinger's booklet, "What Should We Think of the Carnal Christian?" [Banner of Truth]).

But one problem is that it gives false assurance to the person who says, "I believe in Jesus as my Savior, so I am going to heaven. But I am not submitting to Him as my Lord." For the author of Hebrews, either you are holding fast to your confession of faith in Christ and are striving against sin, or you are drifting spiritually and are in danger of frightening judgment. Those are the *only* options.

True believers may drift and may get entangled in sin. But when they are confronted with the truth, they will turn from their sin and pursue holiness. If they do not turn from it, they have no basis for assurance of salvation. The longer they continue in sin, the more reason they have to question whether their profession of faith was genuine. But no one has the option of saying, "I'm just a carnal Christian. I'm living for this world now, but when I die I'll go to heaven." That option does not exist.

The author sets forth the consequences of neglecting salvation by contrasting the Law with the gospel.

A. The Law imposed some frightening penalties for disobedience.

"The word spoken by angels" refers to the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Old Testament does not state directly that angels gave the Law to Moses, but it implies such (Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:17) and the New Testament confirms it (Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19). That Law imposed frightening penalties for sin. Any defiant disobedience was punished by stoning to death (Num. 15:30, 32-36; Josh. 7:1-26). Sometimes God sent punishment directly from heaven, such as when the ground opened and swallowed up Korah and his fellow rebels (Num. 16), or when God sent plagues among the people (Num. 16:46-50; 21:6-9; 25:8-9). In these judgments, God was not being cruel; He was acting in justice (Heb. 2:2).

B. The neglect of the gospel will bring far worse consequences.

The argument is from the lesser to the greater. Greater revelation imposes greater responsibility. If the Jews under the Law were punished for their disobedience, how much more will we come under God's judgment if we associate with God's people, but turn our backs on the great salvation that is offered through the death of God's own Son? That is his argument and appeal.

We err if we think that the demands of the gospel are less exacting than those of the Law. We also err if we think that grace means that we can be sloppy about God's standards of holiness and He just shrugs His shoulders. That is a dangerously wrong way to think! As the author states (10:29), "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" To drift away from the gospel after you've been exposed to it is to turn away from God Himself, who sent His Son so that we could have His gift of salvation. You don't want to do that!

3. In spite of the greatness of God's salvation, we all are in danger of drifting away from it.

As I said, the author uses "we" to include himself as vulnerable. The immediate cause of the Hebrews' drifting was that they were facing trials and the threat of persecution. Whenever we are there, we need to be on guard. We are then most in danger of drifting. But even at other times, drifting is easy because all it requires is neglect.

A. The cause of drifting is neglect.

Usually drifting is inadvertent. If you've ever steered a boat, you know that if you do not deliberately keep it on course, you will drift with the currents. The stronger the current, the more you have to give constant attention to keep the boat on course. Since we live in the strong current of this evil world, we all are prone to drift with the culture.

It does not take active rebellion or defiance against God to go to hell. Simple neglect of salvation while you attend to other things will do the trick nicely. The Greek word "pay attention" (2:1) is used in the parable Jesus told about the king who invited guests to his son's wedding party: "they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business" (Matt. 22:5). There's nothing inherently sinful about farms and businesses—unless they cause you to neglect the king's invitation! Someone put it this way: "What must I do to be lost? Nothing!" Just drift through life, paying attention to other things.

B. The antidote to drifting is paying attention.

“We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard” (2:1). If you attend a church where God’s great salvation is proclaimed from week to week, pay attention to the message! Don’t tune it out and think about what you’re going to do with your week. Don’t yawn and think, “I wish the pastor would be more interesting.” Pay attention to this great salvation!

Start with the basics: Are you giving deliberate effort to seeking God and His salvation? How much attention have you given to understand the gospel? Do you pore over Scripture as you would read a will if you thought a rich relative had left you an inheritance? Do you read and study God’s Word as His treasure entrusted to your soul? Is spending time alone with God in His Word and prayer a priority in your schedule?

How much effort do you put into such a great salvation? Do you set some spiritual goals to help you grow? Do you look for solid books to read that will help you know God better? Do you listen to sermons from godly men that help you become more godly? Do you cut out of your life anything that would divert you from such a great salvation?

Conclusion

It’s wonderful to fall in love and get married. I highly recommend the experience! But marriage is a relationship and relationships take time and effort to maintain. I don’t care how deeply you were in love when you got married, if you neglect your marriage and devote your attention to other things, your marriage will fail. Marriage is a wonderful gift from God and is worth the time and effort it takes to maintain and deepen that relationship.

But salvation is a far greater gift than marriage, because it has to do with our eternal destiny! Don’t let it drift! Don’t neglect it! Don’t get distracted with other things, even with good things! Because our salvation is so great, we must pay closer attention to it, so that we don’t drift away from it. *You are either drifting with regard to your salvation because of neglect, or you are growing because of deliberate effort and attention.* Which is it for you?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some practical ways to keep the greatness of salvation before you at all times?
2. Agree/disagree: A professing Christian who is in sin has no basis for assurance of salvation.
3. Should we seek the miraculous sign gifts in our day? Give biblical support for your answer.
4. Some teach that the Christian life does not involve our effort. Does this view reflect the biblical balance? Why/why not?

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