

Exhortation to Attentiveness (Heb.2.1-4)

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Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Introduction

Some people refer to the first four verses of Hebrews 2 as a parenthesis, which is a digression or departure from the subject. Is this a break in the flow of thought where the writer leaves his subject for a little detour? Well, that is not the case. No, instead of a detour, this is where he is going all along because 2.1-4 is an exhortation. There are similar exhortations throughout the book. They are not parentheses because they are the point of the book. We should remember that the entire book is an exhortation (according to 13.22: **bear with my word of exhortation**). His word of exhortation unfolds in a bunch of exhortations. The exhortations together make up a single, brief, compound, and complex exhortation.

The writer is not abstract but practical in his approach. He gives some lofty theology, but he gives it with a pastoral edge. He wants us to clearly see the significance of his message. In effect, what we have in this book is *preaching written down*; this is the work of a preacher that teaches and applies doctrine. As we know from later in the book, he is earnest about the diet on the word that the people of God receive, whether milk or solid food (5.11-14). Accordingly, our text for today is an exhortation.

Therefore, from the words “pay attention” in 2.1, we get the title for this message, which is “Exhortation to Attentiveness.” If we compare the title with the State of Michigan, then the outline refers to two cities in the State like Wayne and Westland. The two cities of the outline are duty and support. Those are the two places where we are going to travel to try to understand this exhortation (we will go to the city of duty and look around, and then we will do the same in the city of support).

1A. The duty this text presents

Because the word “therefore” is an arrow that points to the main idea, we know that verse 1 gives us the duty of attentiveness: **we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it**. Answering some questions will help us unpack this duty like unpacking a suitcase.

1B. Who has the duty of attentiveness?

Note that “those,” 1.14 becomes “we” in 2.1: ¹⁴**Are they [the angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?** ¹**Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it**. The mention of sins (1.3) presupposes the reality of fallen sinners. Therefore “those” is a reference to sinners that are heirs of the salvation Jesus secured when he made purification of sins. Thus, in the shift from talking about “those” to “we,” the author personalizes his message. “We” refers to heirs of salvation; it includes us here today. The book, you will recall, speaks to the people of the last days (1.2). We are now in the last days because they refer to the entire time from the first to the second coming of Christ; the last days are equivalent to the time between His comings. Along with the original readers of this book, we are the people of God in the time between. This is exhortation to readers then and now.

2B. What is the focus of our attentiveness?

It is **what we have heard** (2.1). It is the gospel message that the apostles heard from the lips of Christ as the first hearers. Then they preached and others became hearers, namely, the writer and readers of the book of Hebrews. You and I here today are hearers in the time between and the focus of our attentiveness is the gospel of salvation that is from God in Christ by the Spirit through the apostles: **It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his**

will (2.3-4). The focus of our attentiveness includes the declarations, sayings, and pronouncements of chapter one regarding salvation (1.3; 2.3).

Thus, it is easy to see how the doctrine of the trinity is part of the message. We have heard the gospel of Christ and His apostles that God verified by the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian doctrine emerges early in the book. Christ is co-Creator with God and the Spirit is co-verifier with God. Now the fact that the Spirit gives gifts “**according to his will**” (2.4) indicates the personality of the Spirit and reminds us that God is three persons with one essence. He is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Granted, the Spirit stays in the background and testifies to Christ (as the Father points us to the Son, “worship Him,” 1.6). This has to do with the economy of salvation in redemptive history from beginning to end. Part of the covenant (touched on in 1.2) is the agreement of the Spirit to apply what the Father planned and Jesus secured. Accordingly, the focus of our attentiveness is Christ about whom the Father speaks and to whom the Spirit testifies in the apostolic NT.

3B. How are we to focus our attentiveness to the gospel message?

The preacher tells us how to focus when he says, **pay much closer attention** (2.1). We are to focus by turning our minds to the gospel in a careful and guarded way. An illustration from preventative medicine makes this point clear.

One of our presidential hopefuls this election year had treatment for skin cancer. He then spoke about prevention. He did a good thing to advise his constituents of the signs and dangers of skin cancer. It sticks in my memory that he presented a lesson about paying attention to changes in a mole or a sore that does not heal. If you pay attention to these things, you may go to a doctor to pay closer attention to, say, an irritated mole. He may even do some minor surgery to have a pathologist give much closer attention.

In this connection, you might have thought that the band aid on my nose last week was for the insertion of a ring. Then my wife could hook a chain on it! Well, that is not the case. Instead, I had an irritated mole removed. When I went to the doctor, I used a line my wife suggested, I told the doctor to cut away because “my modeling days are over.” The truth is that that band aid represents attentiveness on my part, closer attentiveness on the part of the doctor, and much closer attentiveness on the part of the pathologist.

Likewise, the writer of Hebrews is telling us to pay attention to the details of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, there is intensification: pay closer attention beyond the status quo. Moreover, we are to look to Scripture with a fine toothed comb, or to change analogies, we are to look at Scripture using the pathologist’s microscope (to turn our minds to the gospel in a careful and guarded way).

4B. Why are we to focus our attentiveness in this way?

Clearly, we must pay much closer attention to what we have in the apostolic word because of the danger of drifting, as he says, **lest we drift away from it** (2.1). There is both necessity (must) and urgency here (danger).

The danger is that we drift away like a boat drifting away from safe harbor and out to sea with no compass. Scripture is our safe harbor and it is our compass. If we fail in our attentiveness then we drift into the open sea of life while our compass fogs up. We lose direction.

Thus, there ought to be a sense of urgency in our look to the gospel. It is urgent because danger lurks out there on the open sea without a compass. Expansion on the danger is in the next main point.

2A. The support this text gives (the other place for our travels today)

The author not only gives us a duty, he also supports the duty to drive it home to our hearts. He marks the direction he is going by the words “therefore” in 2.1 and “for” in 2.2.

“Therefore” introduces the conclusion (**we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it, 2.1**). This conclusion has its support in what came before it (chapter 1). The word “for” (2.2) informs us that this conclusion has support also in what comes after it (2.2-4).

1B. The support that comes *before* 2.1

The support from chapter one builds on two large points: God spoke and Jesus is His speech (1.1-4) and God says, “Worship My Son” (1.5-14). Central in the call to worship of Christ is His superiority to angels. Remarkably, this superiority belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ as a man: God exalted this man of Galilee through humiliation in the purification of sins to the position of resurrected, unique, and conquering Son who is very God on the throne of the universe. His humiliation and exaltation are for the heirs of salvation.

Because of who Jesus is as the speech of God, it is necessary that we not only attend to the gospel, but that we attend to it fervently with a sense of necessity and urgency. Jesus reveals the mind of God regarding salvation. The gospel of the Son is a saving message that rests on the excellence of the person and work of the incarnate Christ. As such it has a finality, greatness, and superiority that merit our best scrutiny for the salvation of our souls.

2B. The support that comes *after* 2.1

Next, the writer gives a much more argument (the *a fortiori* form of argument): **“For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.** Here, he cites the participation of angels in the giving of the law. For example, in Galatians, Paul says, **it [the law] was put in place through angels** (3.19; cf. Deut. 33.2; Acts 7.38, 53).

The question (how shall we escape?) is by implication a powerful statement: if we neglect such a great salvation that we have in the gospel message of Christ, which is greater than the OT message, then we shall not escape retribution. That is a pointed warning that supports the call to attentiveness. Again the argument moves from the lesser to the greater: if the old message declared by angels received just retribution for every violation (for every transgression or disobedience) then how much more will neglect of the new message of salvation declared by Christ receive just retribution without escape.

If Jesus of the Gospels is far superior to angels (as chapter one indicates) and thus if angels serve Him and worship Him, and if the message of God they delivered giving the law led to just retribution for every transgression, and was therefore to be obeyed, then how much more is it the case that we ought to devote ourselves to obedience to the great salvation Jesus gave us through the apostles by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

For some concluding remarks and applications, let us return to the notion of drifting. Five bullet points reveal the serious business of discipleship that underlies this text.

1) Risk of drifting

The warning is that if you do not keep your focus on the Lord Jesus, then you run the risk of drifting and neglect, and from there, you risk more severe retribution than that of the OT. Surely, the implication is that though the time of promise was rigorous in its temporal punishments, the time of fulfillment is final and therefore takes the disobedient to eternal punishment.

This kind of forceful exhortation occurs throughout the book of Hebrews. Here are two more examples that have a similar flavor of necessity, warning, and urgency:

(10.28-29): **²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?**

(12.25): **²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.**

You must pay attention to the apostolic gospel of the NT because it is God's final word of salvation in Christ. Believe it and live; neglect it and die! It is God's word of salvation by which we live or die. It is His final word of salvation; there is no other.

The forceful nature of this warning yields a natural question: Is the risk here that of temporal judgment as many of the OT cases (the priest who died touching the ark may have been a believer bound for glory) or is the risk here eternal judgment (many who died in the wilderness died in unbelief, 1 Cor. 10)?

Can it be both in that the audience professes faith in Christ (it is a baptized community of professing Christians, Heb. 6.1f.)? Yes, there are real dangers for all who profess adherence to the apostolic message from God by Christ through the apostles by the Spirit. Some of us may drift away from the message and get beat upon quite severely in the open sea *without drowning*. Others may drift away *to the shipwreck of their souls*. Either way, drifting leads to painful consequences.

Lack of attentiveness to the means of grace, to the word and prayer, to a good diet of preaching leads you away from your harbor of safety. It is like letting weeds grow in your garden; little by little, they become overwhelming and very difficult to deal with. For example, you lose your sense of peace, contentment, and become weaker and weaker at self-control.

There is necessity here: a must. It is urgent because danger lurks out there on the open sea without a compass.

2) The subtly of drifting

Drifting and slipping can be quiet, gradual, and unnoticed. Go to the garden after some time passes and you will inevitably say, "Where did all these weeds come from?" and "When did they spring up?" You have to pay close attention to the garden to keep it free of weeds; the more you let them grow the harder it is to get rid of them (the consequences get worse and worse). If you totally neglect, if the battle gets you down and overwhelms you, then the weeds may choke out all potential fruit. The fruitless "Christian" is not a true Christian but a weed himself, a weed among wheat.

You do not have to do anything for the weeds to grow in the garden. You do not have to do anything for a boat to drift away from shore. To prevent weed growth and boat drifting, you must be attentive to the details; you must do so with a due recognition of its necessity; you must do so with an appropriate sense of urgency. If you do not pay attention to the apostolic word, then all you can expect is deterioration in your life (in your religious life, in your spiritual life).

3) The dynamics of duty in the face of this risk

If you know who Jesus is and what He has done, and if you know these things in truth, faith, and repentance, then you will see the necessity and sense the urgency of careful attentiveness to the word of Christ. You will be on guard lest you slip away. You know you may find yourself adrift in troubled waters; you know that there are many troubles of soul, lack of peace, and much heartache out there on the restless sea away from the harbor of safety. You also know that all who neglect the gospel in a complete and decisive way will not escape final judgment. If you know Christ, then this warning will not go unnoticed; it will affect you and stir you up. You do not want to even get near the edge of that place from which there is no return.

This text cracks the door of the subject of perseverance in this book. The call to persevere is firm and the warnings attached contain severe elements. (This is a microcosm of this doctrine writ large on the pages of this sermon in letter form).

Perseverance has a center. It is Christ attested to by God through the apostolic testimony as Jesus promised (Jn. 14.26; 15.26-27). For clarity, paying attention to the message means clinging to the Lord Jesus as your prophet, priest, and king (Mat. 11.28-30).

The intellectual climate of our time puts low priority on doctrine and truth and gives high priority to emotional experience. We are to march to a different drum. For disciples, truth has utmost importance; what we believe is eternally critical. What a person believes about Christ either saves or damns.

4) The work that offsets drifting

Paying attention to details means hard work (work with a capital L). People are looking for power, success, and effectiveness by decision or by positive thinking (cf. how many pastors are motivational speakers with reversed collars). Every method for success receives emphasis except the old tried and true method: work at being disciples under pastors who work at being teachers: this is a call to me and you to do our main job of teaching and receiving teaching (Mat. 28.16-20).

To worship the Son in obedience, you must abide in His word. This is the mark of a true disciple (Jn. 8.31, **So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples**). Notice the implication here of "believers" who are not disciples, that is, who are not truly believers. You abide in Him when His word abides in you (Jn. 15.4, 7-8, **⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me...⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you...⁸ you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples**). Learning the truth and living it is the proof of true discipleship.

5) Promise in contrast to drifting

There is no other way to have a firm anchor and to have a weeded garden, you must do the work; you must work hard in the word. Truly, without pain there is no gain. Thus, no Christian can expect to grow in godliness if, to quote Ryle, he is "not diligent about his Bible-reading, his prayers, and the use of his Sundays" (Cited by Phillips, Hebrews, p. 50). True growth in holiness comes by hard work just as fruitful farming comes by hard work.

The apostles' gospel of the NT is God's final word of salvation. We are to look nowhere else for a word from God. We are to look only to Christ by means of the testimony to Him that God gave through the apostles by the Holy Spirit.

Instead of looking for spectacular miracles and emotional experiences, you are to be working at the miracle of change that is in front of you as you pay attention to the gospel message. By studied attentiveness, you have the promise of stability and safety instead of drifting away into oblivion. You *can* grow and you *will* grow in the graces of the Christian life by abiding in Christ the true vine, and you do that by abiding in His holy word.

Now may we fall down before the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ and let us worship Him by acknowledging His place in the covenant of redemption. May the Holy Spirit enable us to see the importance of learning by paying close attention to the gospel of Jesus our risen Lord. May the Spirit give us a hunger for His word and righteousness and the determined strength to do the work in the word that honors Him. To the Lord Jesus be glory and honor, now and forevermore, amen.