

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 5      January 3, 2016      Warning Not to Neglect Salvation

## Introduction

Hebrews 2:1-4

This is the first of 5 warning passages in Hebrews<sup>i</sup> and all together they pick up on a similar theme, and just by observing a verse or two from each one, we can identify the basic overall theme; Note – Heb. 2:1; 3:11; 6:4-6; 10:35-36; 12:25. Do not neglect the gospel; endure; do not fall away; do not refuse Him; etc.

Although there are many groups of people ( Muslims, Hindus, Shintos, and so on ), who, as a group, hate the true God and oppose all He is and what His people stand for, and even kill Christians, and individuals ( atheists – Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens; Bible critics – Bart Ehrmann, etc. ) who hate the very concept of God, Christ and His Word, and who sharply criticize believers as closed-minded, bigoted morons and hate mongers; and special interest groups ( the Left; gay rights advocates, pro-choice advocates ) try to overcome and marginalize the moral influence of God's people; the truth is that the majority of people who end up in hell do so out of apathy and ignorance. John MacArthur rightly comments here;

“Hell is undoubtedly full of people who were never actively opposed to Jesus Christ, but who simply neglected the gospel. Such people are in view in these four verses. They know the truth and even believe the truth, in the sense that they acknowledge its truthfulness, its rightness. They are well aware of the good news of salvation provided in Jesus Christ, but are not willing to commit their lives to Him. So they drift past the call of God into eternal damnation. This tragedy makes these verses extremely important and urgent.”<sup>ii</sup>

## Do Not Drift Away

v. 1

As a result of what the author of Hebrews has laid out in chapter 1, this chapter begins with the word, “Therefore”. This word here carries the significant weight of announcing, “Since Jesus Christ is as much better than the angels, as He hath received by inheritance a more excellent name than they – since He is both essentially and officially inconceivably superior to these heavenly messengers, His message has paramount claims to our attention, belief and obedience. We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard.”<sup>iii</sup>

Per our discussion on the warning passages ( the last lesson ), v. 1 plainly shows how God is providing us with a sign – a way to escape what the author refers to as “drifting away”. He uses the personal pronoun, “we” – in fact, he uses it 3 times in v. 1. So this drifting away has not yet occurred, but the implication is, it could.

Wayne Grudem comments;

“The author needs some way of speaking about himself and his readers as an entire group, and the use of the first person plural is an ordinary conversational convention for doing that. It does

not imply that everyone in the group is subject to everything discussed using this convention, but only that some ( at least ) are included. In this case, the author knows that some among his readers are in danger of falling away, but he does not know specifically who they are, so he includes this general kind of warning at several places in the epistle.”<sup>iv</sup>

So the Holy Spirit here tells us that we must:

- Pay much closer attention to what we have heard – “the warning & escape”
- Or we will drift away from the message – “the first result”
- V. 3 – or we may not escape if we neglect so great a salvation – “the worst result, finality, apostasy and hell”

“*What we have heard*” is according to “*therefore*” all of chapter 1, and Christ’s superiority and Lordship. This first verse is a command, not a suggestion ( as we will see that all the warning passages are ), so that, “in view of His sovereignty, and His power and His rights over us we [ KJV ] ought to give the more earnest heed.”<sup>v</sup>

In paying close attention to what we’ve heard ( God’s Word speaking to us as we read it ), we apply our mind to it, contemplate it, compare it to what is said here after v. 1 and the appropriate the truth of it in order to produce in us a recognition of the danger I am in if I do not take heed, if I do not pay attention to it.

A.W. Pink;

“The duty here intended is a serious, firm, and fixed settling of the mind upon that which we hear; a bowing and bending of the will to yield unto it; an applying of the heart to it, a placing of the affections upon it, and bringing the whole man into conformity thereunto. Thus it comprises knowledge of the Word, faith therein, obedience thereto, and all other due respects that may any way concern it.”<sup>vi</sup>

Once we have seen who Christ is, have seen His beauty ( cf. Job 42:5-6 ), have heard the call and command ( Rom. 10:16 ) of the gospel, we either let it grab hold of us and follow Christ, or we let our heart and mind wander to worldly things, to the pleasures of sin; and in the sense of the first readers of this epistle, to go back to what seemed to them to be a simpler, safer way to worship God.

“Those who have been regenerated by the Spirit and are the objects of His sanctifying work are ever growing in the knowledge that Christ is their life, and apart from Him they are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” They are learning that apart from Him they can do nothing, and being motivated by an ever-increasing knowledge of their weakness, they are driven to know God’s will and keep themselves safely inside it.”<sup>vii</sup> – Paul Washer

To those being persecuted, the temptation is to capitulate and renounce Christ, to escape the here and now danger. They had to see ( and hence, this warning passage ) that the real ( eternal ) danger was in neglecting who Jesus Christ was!

Scot Williquette points out the importance of understanding why to “drift away” is so easy to do. “Drifting away is slow and unnoticed; the word refers to something that happens

largely unnoticed”, and “drifting away is often influenced by unseen forces – a boat doesn’t drift from its intended spot unless it is influenced by some outside force like the wind or an unseen current, The winds of thought that swirl around us every day are ministers of Satan. They are attractive and alluring, and if we begin to listen to them, they will pull us away from Christ...Drifting is a potential danger for every one of us. ‘I can flirt with sin, I can hobnob with the world. I’ll be alright. The current of the world will never pull me under.’”<sup>viii</sup> Or so we think.

Satan is subtle – so is our own mind – we recognise the big sins and try to avoid them, but it is simple to just be subtly pushed out of place a little bit at a time, until, as time passes, we find ourselves far away from Christ...and He is not the One who walked away.

“The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not a license for sin or a means of giving false assurance of salvation to the carnal and ungodly. Yes, the doctrine affirms that God keeps those He saves, but it also affirms that He transforms those He keeps. The genuine believer has assurance of salvation not only because of a past profession of faith but also because of the ongoing work of God in his life that continues to transform him into the image of Christ. The person who professes faith in Christ and yet bears no evidence of faith, a divine work of regeneration, or the continuing work of divine providence can have little assurance of eternal life. This is not because he has lost a salvation he once possessed, but because he is demonstrating that he never possessed the salvation he claims.”<sup>ix</sup>

I found this lengthy quote by John MacArthur helpful, as well as clearing up a mystery for me, since I recalled the situation, but could not recall this man’s name; “William Pope was a member of the Methodist Church in England for most of his life. He made a pretense of knowing Christ and served in many capacities. His wife died a genuine believer. Soon, however, he began to drift from Christ. He had companions who believed in the redemption of demons. He began going with them to the public houses of prostitution. In time, he became a drunkard. He admired Thomas Paine and would assemble with his friends on Sundays when they would confirm each other in their infidelity. They amused themselves by throwing the Bible on the floor and kicking it around. Then he contracted tuberculosis. Someone visited him and told him of the Great Redeemer. He said Pope could be saved from the punishment of his sins.

But Pope replied, “I have no contrition: I cannot repent. God will damn me! I know the day of grace is lost. God has said to such as me, “I will laugh at your calamity, and mock when your fear cometh.” I have denied Him; my heart is hardened.”

Then he cried, “Oh the hell, the pain I feel! I have chosen my way. I have done the horrible damnable deed; I have crucified the Son of God afresh; I have counted the blood of the covenant an unholy thing! Oh that wicked and horrible thing of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, which I know I have committed; I want nothing but hell. Come, oh devil and take me!”<sup>x</sup>

## The Reliable Message: Don’t Neglect It vv. 2-3

A.W. Pink boils down to 4 reasons why we need to pay much closer attention to these things; “First, because of the glory and majesty of the One by whom He [ God ] has

communicated His mind and will, the Son. Second, because the message of Christianity is final. Third, because of the infinite preciousness of the gospel. Fourth, because of the hopeless perdition and terrible tortures awaiting those who reject or let slip the testimony of God's wondrous grace."<sup>xi</sup>

Now, a fifth reason is provided – the certainty of God's wrath ( signified by the phrase, "how shall we escape?" ) - His just retribution, which will be applied to those who neglect His great salvation.

When the author speaks of the "message declared by angels", this probably refers to the Mosaic law ( cf. Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Deut. 33:1-3 ). Of course, angels are not the writers of Scripture, nor the source of it, but were sent by God to be mediums of its transmission. Their role was as ministers of it, as administrators of it – cf. Acts 8:26ff as an example. We have seen some of this in chapter 1.

Note also, here in v. 2, "every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution". There is an "if"...then" construction here, typical of many if not all warning passages. The "if" here is actually "since...the message...", and the "then" is implied i.e.) "[ then ] *how shall we escape?*" Those under the Old Covenant ( Mosaic Law ) received a just punishment for their neglect – in fact, note Heb. 3:13-19 ( part of the next warning passage ). Disobedience here is equated with unbelief and the just punishment for 'rebellin'g' was that they did not enter God's rest. Serious punishment, but nevertheless, just in light of Who and what they rebelled against.

In light of this, and in light of our greater biblical insight because of our position in history regarding who Jesus Christ is, "*how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*" How indeed? Note Heb. 10:26-31 – the 4<sup>th</sup> warning passage which highlights that, with greater knowledge, rebellion results in greater condemnation.

Again ( 2:3 ) note the personal pronouns "We", "we", "us". The author includes himself and those he writes to as being potentially in danger of neglecting this salvation, and certainly, the author was a believer, as would have been most of those he wrote to – not theoretical believers, but real believers. The gospel, for surely this is what the author is referring to here as "*so great a salvation*", is what can be neglected by drifting away from it.

"Fitly may the gospel be styled 'salvation'; first, because in opposition to the law ( which was a 'ministration of condemnation' 2 Cor.3:9 ), it is a ministration of salvation. Second, because the author of the gospel is "salvation" itself ( LK 2:30; JN 4:22, etc. ), where salvation is synonymous with "the Saviour". Third, because whatever is needed for knowledge of salvation is contained in the gospel. Fourth, because is God's appointed means of salvation; see I Cor. 1:21. True, in OT times God's elect had and knew the gospel – Gal. 3:16; Heb. 4:2 – yet it was not publicly proclaimed and fully expounded. They had it under types and shadows, and in promises and prophecies."<sup>xii</sup>

“The Gospel is for the sinner’s acceptance; see I Tim 1:15; 2 Cor 11:4! The Gospel is more than a publication of good news, more than an invitation for burdened souls to come to Christ for relief and peace, In its first address to those who hear, it is a Divine mandate, an authoritative command, which is disregarded at the sinner’s imminent peril. That it does issue a ‘command’ is clear from Acts 17:30; Rom. 16:25,26. That disobedience to this ‘command’ will be punished, is clear from JN 3:18; I Pet 4:17 & 2 Thess 1:8.”<sup>xiii</sup>

v. 3b – “*It was declared at first by the Lord*” – cf. Matt. 4:17 ( par MK 1:14-15 ); LK 4:43-44; JN 3:3. Although John the Baptist was technically the 1<sup>st</sup> NT gospel preacher, the pre-eminent preacher was Christ Himself – the true proclaimer of the visible gospel. Matthew 4:16-17 tells us that light had come into the world, and in His proclamation of the Gospel, the people “*saw a great light*”, as predicted in the OT.

Secondarily, v. 3c says “*and it was attested to us by those who heard*”. Who is the ‘us’ here? This is important because most who refuse to see Paul as the author of Hebrews use this verse as a primary proof text, since Paul was not an original eyewitness of Christ in His ministry with the disciples as recorded in the 4 Gospels. Schreiner makes a helpful comment here;

“This verse functions as strong evidence against Pauline authorship. Even though he wasn’t an eyewitness, he nowhere describes himself as dependent on others for the gospel he proclaimed. He emphasizes instead that Jesus called him to be an apostle on the Damascus road and that his knowledge of the gospel was not dependent on the other apostles – Gal. 1:11-17.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Christ, and even His disciples were not the only ones who ever proclaimed the gospel message. They were the first although there is plenty of gospel in the OT, although “gospel” is really a NT word. Note JN 17:20,26. Here, Jesus plainly indicates that the gospel will be proclaimed generationally, and the underlying tenet of the NT is that God’s people will evangelize the lost – Matt. 28:19-20 through Revelation. There is also a sense in which the entire Bible is “the gospel”. In fact, Jude 3 calls it “*the faith once delivered to the saints.*”

## God Has Borne Witness

v. 4

This section supplies 4 reasons to put trust in this great salvation. (1) The message declared by angels proved reliable; (2) it was declared by Jesus Himself as the gospel; (3) it was also passed along to others by those who heard the message’ and (4) now – proof is found in the signs, wonders and miracles which verify and validate God’s Word and the gifts of the Holy Spirit also demonstrated God’s work in the lives of His people.

The miracles of Jesus Christ were designed to authenticate His person and message as from God; the signs were signs that the Kingdom was present, and “signs” suggests that the people who saw the miracles and heard Jesus’ words should have discerned their significance. “Wonders” tells us of the astonishing nature of God’s work. The gifts of the Holy Spirit here are probably just that – the gifts listed in I Cor. 12-14 along with the gifts of the Spirit in other NT lists of gifts. The miraculous gifts would

have still been in operation when Hebrews was written since there were still some apostles alive ( John for example ), and the NT canon was not yet complete. John's gospel, I, II, & III John and Revelation were still to come.

*“Very clear light is shed on the purpose of the miraculous gifts by Hebrews 2:3-4: “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard Ho. God also testified to it by signs and wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.” According to this passage the word of salvation was first announced by the Lord Jesus Christ. It was then confirmed to both the writer and the readers of this epistle by those who heard the Lord – that is, the apostles. God testified to the genuineness of that salvation by those gifts of the Holy Spirit which are here called “signs, wonder and miracles. The purpose of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, therefore, as described in this text, was to authenticate the message of salvation to those second-generation-after-Christ readers.”<sup>xv</sup>*

All these things demonstrated that God was at work and had put His seal of approval on the message of Hebrews. Even if the gifts of the Spirit mentioned here are not the miraculous gifts, they are certainly those gifts mentioned elsewhere in the NT.

So we arrive at the end of the first warning passage in Hebrews. Schreiner again comments;

*“The NT nowhere teaches that an initial acceptance of the saving message is sufficient without perseverance in faith. We must not drift from the faith or neglect our great salvation. If the people of God in the OT received earthly punishments for transgressing the Mosaic law mediated by angels, then those who repudiate the heavenly revelation given by the Son will not escape final judgment. Nor can we say that the revelation spoken by the Son is uncertain, for the Lord Himself came to earth to speak the word. And it was then confirmed by those who heard the Lord in history. Finally, God attested to the truth of the revelation through signs, miracles, and wonders and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Apostasy, then, would constitute a rejection of a clear word from God. No one can make the excuse that the revelation was not sufficiently certified so that doubts were permissible...Warnings are not designed to rob people of hope, but to steer them away from danger in order to preserve them so that they might persevere and inherit what has been promised.”<sup>xvi</sup>*

### How Does My View of the Warning Passages Interpret This Warning Passage?<sup>xvii</sup>

The Warning Passages are God's means of saving His people. But contrary to one of the views of the Warning Passages – that they only serve to warn us of a loss of eternal rewards – IOW, we are saved regardless of our way of life once we are saved, we still “enter the Kingdom” without “inheriting the Kingdom”. Here is what Charles Stanley, a proponent of that view says about this very passage;

*“Those who would use this passage to support an argument against eternal security miss the author's point altogether. He is warning believers. Just as OT believers were chastened when they drifted away or disobeyed the law, so NT believers would be chastened as well – only more*

vigorously! Why? Because the revelation we are responsible for came directly from the Son. There is not the first implication that a loss of salvation is in view here. There is no mention of heaven, hell, judgment, or any of the other things associated with the eternal destiny of a man.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Stated as this is here, this is a ludicrous position.

Instead, the passage speaks of salvation ( especially vv. 3-4 ) and something akin to an escape from God’s wrath, which almost always refers to eschatological wrath ( i.e. Hell ) The sign God places in the reader’s path to assist him / her from “neglecting (v.3) this great salvation (v. 3) is chapter 1 in its entirety as the context and the exhortation to “pay closer attention” to what we have heard lest we “drift away from it” – cf. 2:1. The mention in v. 4 of God’s bearing witness by signs and wonders “to those who heard” bolsters our view, by again showing that the narrow road to salvation in Christ is in a sense ‘framed’ by proofs of who Christ is [ attested in the gospels by His miracles, signs and wonders – cf. Luke 8:22-26 ], and by His unique death ( MT 27:50-54 ), resurrection from the dead ( JN 20:26-29 ), and the witness of the epistles and their explanation of what all this meant theologically ( Rom. 3:21-26 ).

This first Hebrews Warning Passage is a call to persevere in the faith. As noted in Paul Washer’s quote cited above, and contrary to Charles Stanley’s position, it is certainly dealing with salvation and its potential loss. The great Spurgeon mentioned in a quote from our last lesson the care we must take to not try to get as close to the gulf that represents where our sin might take us, but rather stay a very respectable distance away from it. We also looked at II Peter 1:3-11 in our last lesson, and the sense of it can easily be applied here, which is a remedy for avoiding neglecting our salvation. You cannot neglect the great salvation God has provided us with if we follow Peter’s prescription. In v. 13 in that passage, he comments, “to stir you up by way of reminder”. We all need reminding from time to time of the greatness which God has bestowed on us a gift. In our lives, in our humanity, in the inward pull of our ‘old man’, there is an almost magnetic force acting on us to neglect, forsake, undervalue or walk away from the greatest thing that has ever happened to us – because we can’t see it and won’t receive full cognizant benefit of it until we die or are raptured. God’s warning is: don’t do what is in your old nature to do. Instead, persevere, stay on the narrow path – cf. Heb.12:1-2; finish the race. According to Phil. 1:6, He is helping us to finish it. It will be worth effort.

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<sup>i</sup> The other 4 are: Heb. 3:12-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39; 12:25-29

<sup>ii</sup> John MacArthur, Hebrews, p. 39

<sup>iii</sup> John Brown, An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Banner of Truth, London, 1964 – 1862 originally; p. 71

<sup>iv</sup> Wayne Grudem, from his essay – Perseverance of the Saints, in; Still Sovereign, Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware, editors, Baker Books, 2000, p. 173

<sup>v</sup> A.W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1963, Vol. 1.; p. 84

<sup>vi</sup> IBID, p. 84

<sup>vii</sup> Paul Washer, Gospel Assurance & Warnings, Reformation Heritage, 2014, P. 81

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<sup>viii</sup> Scott Williquette, Hebrews: The Warning Passages –Study Course / Teaching Notes – rec’d from Scott on 8/20/15 via email

<sup>ix</sup> Washer, pp. 93-94

<sup>x</sup> John MacArthur, The Upper Room, Kress Christian Publications, 2014, p. 179-180

<sup>xi</sup> Pink, p. 85

<sup>xii</sup> IBID, p. 87

<sup>xiii</sup> IBID, p. 88

<sup>xiv</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 82

<sup>xv</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, Saved by Grace, Eerdmans, 1989, p. 34

<sup>xvi</sup> IBID, p. 84

<sup>xvii</sup> See p. 7 ff in our last lesson

<sup>xviii</sup> Charles Stanley, Eternal Security – You Can Be Sure?, Oliver Nelson, p. 160