

Sermon 4: Hebrews 2:1-4: The First Exhortation

OUTLINE

Pay closer attention lest you drift
Pay closer attention to a superior declaration

INTRODUCTION

‘Prone to wander Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.’ A famous line from the famous hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. The human heart is a fickle and unfaithful thing. We start out with the best of intentions but then we find that inner wanderer exerting itself and we drift from our dedication; we slack off from keeping our word; we meander away from into sin and compromise. The guarding of the human heart is one of our great tasks as a believer. Prov. 4:23 is a truth we have to apply every day, ‘Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.’ One of the great dangers we are to guard against is the drift into unbelief. Just because God is real does not mean our hearts will not doubt Him; just because something is true does not mean that we can fail to feel its truthiness; just because you started with a vibrant and convinced faith does not mean that your faith cannot be shaken; just because there was a time when Jesus was the absorbing desire of your heart and the greatest provoker of love and devotion does not mean that your feeble heart cannot betray Him.

This is the danger the audience of Hebrews is wrestling with. They are under duress, the appeal of not believing in Jesus is selling itself to them and they are looking at the grass on the other side thinking it might be greener. The arguments promoting Judaism have begun to develop in their minds, the apparent benefits and glories of Judaism are on their lips; that once firm hold upon Christ is loosening as they try and convince themselves that they are doing the right thing. What was once unthinkable, leaving Christ, is now not so unthinkable. The author began his letter launching straight into the glories of the Son. The whole first chapter is a contrast between the Son and the angels, and the word of the OT to the word that God speaks through His Son. Chapter 2:1-4 is part of this contrast, as the author comes to his first exhortation not to drift by paying closer attention to the greater word of God through the Son.

As we look at these verses we have two points, firstly we will see the exhortation, pay closer attention lest you drift. Secondly, the author will motivate why demonstrating that God has spoken a greater word through the Son, which warrants a greater judgement if neglected. Pay closer attention lest you drift. Pay closer attention to a superior declaration.

Pay closer attention lest you drift

V1, ‘Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.’ This is the first of seven strongly worded warnings. These warnings must be taken in context. Some might see them as a wrathful God flexing to get our cooperation, a tool of manipulation and control. Not so. These warnings are backhanded compliments to the glorious savior and salvation presented in this letter. The strength of the warnings underline the truth that God’s final word, God’s greatest acts of salvation, that the God-man has come and finished His cross work for our salvation. The great punishments spoken of

in these various admonitions hold up and enhance our view of the greater salvation that is ours in Christ. all of this goes to confirm that Christ is the one we are to believe in and cling, that the salvation we have in Him is the truth. Our author begins this verse with a 'therefore.' In other words, chapter 1, with its presentation of the Son as God's final word and the fulfilment of OT expectation; as God; as Creator; as Sustainer; as the great Highpriest who made purification for sins; who is seated at God's right hand, with the name above all names, having all authority, who is worshipping by angels, and whom angels obey as they do His bidding in executing His plans on behalf of His church. That grand vista of Christ's glory is put forward to enforce this exhortation.

The author warns us that if we do not pay closer attention we will drift. Let us talk a bit about what drifting looks like. All agree that this is a nautical metaphor, the language of boats applied to our spiritual lives. The idea of drifting can describe several scenarios: a ship that had been so storm battered that its anchor has lost hold; or a boat that has broken its sails and rudders and is adrift and at the mercy of winds and tides; a subtle and incremental creep where degree by degree a boat drifts off course. When it comes to our faith there are several tides and undertows that can cause us to drift from our faith.

Firstly, there is the storm of intimidation and persecution that can put the saint under duress. This is the scenario that these saints being written to are facing. The looming threat of the Roman empire falling upon them; Nero's insanity getting out of control and noises about Christians becoming public enemy number one; the precedent of past persecutions where all Jews were kicked out of Rome; the incessant and persistent noises that the Jews were making about Christianity fighting for the legal protections given to Judaism not being extended to this new faith. Along with whatever social ostracism they have already suffered as a result of converting to Christ, the loss of family, in-laws, the community of the synagogue; as well as economic pressure from loss of business, connections and customers. The open and warm embrace of the synagogue was waiting for them with all of its legal protections if only they will go back.

The call of the author is to go back to what we have heard in Christ, to see again what we have in Christ, to sink our anchor more deeply into the bedrock which is Christ. How would this help in this situation? If losing our lives is our main concern, we have a Saviour who has conquered the grave; if needing to build our lives on the authority of God's word, the final word of God is given through His Son; if the majesty of the law which has been delivered by angels is a draw card, well the law pointed to the Son, the Son who is God has spoken and is worshipped and served by the same angels that were intermediaries in delivering the law. If it is about the priesthood and the sacrifices, Christ is greater in these as well. But remember that Jesus saves us from a greater enemy than Pharaoh or Caesar, He saves us from our sins; He unites us with God; He is ruling over all worldly powers and is coming again to judge His enemies. The tactic of the author is to take us back to Christ, His person and work and move our hearts with the overwhelming truth that we might see that we have more in Him than anything this world can offer.

But there are also the winds of deception that seek to blow us off course and into error. The devil does not only wage war upon our bodies in persecution, but also our minds as he seeks to deceive us. I think that we are peculiarly vulnerable at a time like this. We live in the information age where you can search up any

idea and have an overwhelming amount of information. AI will gather for you all the arguments and answers you want on any matter. How does our faith survive when we have more access to more errors, which are being better argued and more refined every day? One way is by exposing the baseline of doubt that is mistaken for honest intellectual enquiry. Descartes the father of modern philosophy tried to build the whole of the human knowing project on doubt. He tried to doubt everything, ask questions of everything, and if anything survived his doubts, that is the thing you can build your faith on. Is this a good way to go through the world? No it is not for two key reasons. Firstly, God has spoken, His word is true, to doubt the one who cannot lie is an insult and a lack of intellectual integrity. Secondly, your ability to doubt and answer is not the test of all truth, we are finite creatures with faulty thinking, even the best of human reasoning cannot escape being human reasoning. One writer warns of the usefulness of doubt this way: 'doubt has a slippery and sneaky side to it that tells us the answers to our doubts are found in more questions and more doubt. Perhaps you have found yourself caught in this riptide at one time or another. This is the spiritually deadly side of doubt, where answers are not the goal of doubt. By all appearances you appear as a "thinker." But you are no thinker; you are one who is being misled into thinking that "answers" and "questions" are the same thing. The devil's playground is not just an idle mind and hands but in creating a mind that does not want to settle for answers. One's doubts, when left unchecked by Christian faith, will turn in on themselves and create deeper and deeper unanswerable doubts that will indeed ultimately lead to an abandonment of that which once anchored one's soul.'¹

We are dependent upon God to reveal what we cannot know and He has in His word, more than that in His Son. And the good news is that we have a place to rest our faith upon the perfect, unchanging God who cannot lie. We have Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith as our Saviour and our example, He is presently helping us, the call to endure in faith is key.

Another cause for drift is being so storm battered by the trials of this life that our sails no longer catch the wind, and our rudders are not able to guide us against the winds. Tribulation! Difficulty, whether it be persecution, sickness, poverty, being the victim of crime can raise questions and send us running for refuge and relief. One of the most amazing ways in which Christ is portrayed in this letter is as the suffering Son. Even though the Son, even He had to learn obedience by suffering. Suffering is spoken of in this letter as discipline, and that we should not grow disheartened but recognize a loving Father in all of our difficulties. It is this Son who is even now at the right hand of the Father interceding for us, sympathizing with us, applying all the benefits of His finished work to aid us.

A riptide that can cause us to drift from God is seduction, temptation, sin. 'One of C.S. Lewis's better-known works, *The Screwtape Letters*, highlights interaction between Screwtape, a senior demon and instructor, and Wormwood, a demon in training. Screwtape lays out effective ways to undermine the Words of God and cause those who follow God to abandon their belief and Christian commitment. Wily Screwtape gives Wormwood this gem of wisdom regarding the temptation necessary to cause one to abandon belief in God:

You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy [God]. It does not matter how small the sins are provided

¹ <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/thoughts-on-why-people-drift-from-the-faith/>

*that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.'*² That is why in 12:1 the author writes, 'let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.' Big sins or little sins are the enemy of our faith. Sin hardens us, it deceives us, it grieves the Spirit that we no longer have the benefit of His holy ministrations like conviction, freedom in prayer, the joy of our salvation. As a Christian you may not be drifting sue to deception, or intimidation, or tribulation but what about seduction? Does sin seem more real and joyful and fulfilling to you right now? If yes then you are adrift. You too need to look to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith and endure by saying no to sin.

A more insidious undercurrent that causes drift is distraction. Faith is something that we need to nourish as feed upon the word of God and prayer, so things like busyness can cause our faith to flounder. Once again we are facing a peculiar temptation as we all have smart phones. We are all dopamine addicts who cannot function without having this technology strapped to us. We are distracted with news, with social media, with entertainment, with conspiracy theories, with social commentary, with our favourite personalities, and many other things. For many of us our faith is a small tree being crowded out by the bigger trees of these constant distractions that we fill our lives with. The result of this is a slow fade, numbness, indifference. The once ardent faith that we risked friendships for in order to speak about has now become a dead burden due to our short attention span and the constant seeking after instant gratification.

What is the cure for all of these drifts, of intimidation; deception; tribulation; seduction and distraction? The cure is the same for all, 'we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.' Jesus is worth more; Jesus has overcome all our enemies; Jesus is our companion and our prize. As we think about our sins and how great they are; as we think about God and how great He is, and the fact that God became a man and who lived and suffered a horrendous death for us, the fact that He is reigning now and as the head of the church is head over all things. If God be for us who can be against us; if God is our portion what is sin or temporary pleasure?

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V2-3a, '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?' The author now warns why it is necessary to give careful attention, there is a terrible danger in rejecting the message of Christ. The author makes the argument from the lesser to the greater showing that if the OT law punished sin without fail, how much more will the final word of God through His Son be punished. Here he is highlighting that as these Jewish believers flirt with the idea of escaping difficulty and persecution in fleeing back to Judaism, by doing so they will bring a worse judgement upon themselves.

The author talks about the OT law as declared by angels. If we look at Ex. 19-20 when the OT law was given there is no mention of angels, but Deut. 33:2 reveals

² Ibid.

that many angels were present, “‘The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.’ Exactly what role they played is not clear but this angelic presence at the giving of the law is recognized in several places in the NT as well, Acts 7:53 and Gal. 3:19. This we have said is part of a larger comparison between the Son and the angels. The angels were involved in giving the law, the Son is God’s final word. The law is the perfect word of God but it is incomplete, it is promises made, it speaks in types, the word of God spoken through the Son is also the perfect word of God but it is God’s climactic and final word, it is the culmination of all of the promises of the OT, and is not speaking in types but realities. If the Holy God whose law in the OT held all sin to account and severely punished sin giving it what it deserved in the temporal punishments spelled out in the law; how much more will God punish those who reject Jesus Christ.

We need to hear the seriousness of this. The author is not writing to people who have not heard the gospel, he is writing to people in church, people who have heard the full truth of God’s work in Christ. He is speaking to those who have heard that God has become a man, who have heard the stories of the gospels seeing all that Jesus has done, how He lived a perfect life and died in payment for our crimes. How He was resurrected and how forgiveness does not come by works but freely through faith in Him. That sinners can receive a true and full pardon for sin and be reconciled to God in a way unknown until now. To sin against such light is a greater sin. The WLC catechism question 151 deals with this matter. ‘Q. 151. *What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?*

A. Sins receive their aggravations,

1. From the persons offending; if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.
2. From the parties offended: if immediately against God, his attributes, and worship; against Christ, and his grace; the Holy Spirit, his witness, and workings; against superiors, men of eminency, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto; against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any other, and the common good of all or many.’ Did you hear it, sin is more serious when against Christ and His grace. For someone to become a Christian to receive all of God’s best, that has been paid for by the immeasurable sufferings of Jesus on the cross, a salvation promised from all eternity, accomplished by the greatest acts of power God has displayed, which yields the most incredible of salvations, that guilty rebels would become adopted children. And then to turn your back on Him, to prefer anything else before Him, this is highhanded sin. I do not like to use scare tactics when preaching, but let me say, this is scary, there are times when the truth is scary. It is scary for all who have known the truth. It is scary for our young children who are growing up under the truth of God’s word. It is worse for someone who has grown up in the truth to sin than for one who has not. It is worse to have had all the benefit of a Christian home, Sunday school, Christian education, a bible preaching church, and to turn your back on the one who is God, who has done more than we can measure, and to prefer sin instead of Him. Jer. 2:12-13 sum up this sin well, ‘Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.’ God is a consuming fire who cannot ignore those who take His best and throw it in His face. To do so is the highest form of sinning. These

warnings are necessary and underline the seriousness of the eternal truths that we are discussing. We must take these things to heart and not make light. Do not let what we say pass you by, don't let them be more words that you forget, don't sit here and wish that this were all over, these are some of the most serious and important things that you will ever hear. Do not neglect so great a salvation.

How great is this salvation? V3b-4, '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.' Our salvation is great because we were so lost, God who is so High, became so low and suffered so much, to make us more than we could ever deserve to enjoy riches we can never plumb. The author wants to emphasize however the means by which this salvation was declared to us. We did not merely get a letter, or even an angelic messenger. No, Jesus Himself spoke about the day of salvation that had come. He Himself, God in the flesh announced good news, that sinners could be saved and inherit the kingdom of God. But more than that the Son authorized apostles to go out and preach based on eye witness accounts. These hearers heard these eye witnesses. More than that God authenticated the ministry of these apostles with signs which point to Christ, wonders to cause awe and reverence, and miracles which literally means powers to attest to the veracity of this message. But more than that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church and this church had experienced the various spiritual gifts we have mentioned in the NT. Look carefully and you will see that the Trinity has spoken, Lord is the Son; God is the Father and the Holy Spirit is present ministering through the spiritual gifts as well. Father, Son and Holy Spirit have conspired to act and speak revealing the greatest of all possible salvations by the greatest of all beings suffering immeasurable pains to save immeasurably unworthy sinners. Let us pay more careful attention.