

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

The Danger of Drifting

Hebrews 2:1-4

This past week I was informed of another Christian leader in our community who has “drifted,” this time into immorality. And every time I hear of a believer “drifting,” I’m reminded of just how vulnerable I am. I, too, am prone to “drift.” And so are you.

Drifting is a subtle thing. It happens so gradually, and we can be relatively unaware of what is taking place. I’ll never forget what once happened to me and my Dad. I was only twelve at the time. We would often take our summer vacation at the Gulf Coast near Biloxi, Mississippi. One summer, we took a canoe with us, thinking we could get in some good, early morning fishing. Early one morning we set out into the Gulf (and I wouldn’t recommend doing that in a canoe...canoes are made for lakes, not oceans!). But the early morning back-tide caught us by surprise. Before we knew it, we were more than a mile out and could barely see our coast-side cottage. And then we really knew we were in danger when I caught a shark, and not a fish. The shark was so powerful that it broke the fishing line. Several days later we found it dead on the shore, line and sinker caught in its throat. Drifting is dangerous. And it happens all the time.

Before going any further, let me remind us of where we are in this letter (which, as you’ll recall, is really a sermon meant to be delivered all at once). We’re in the first major section of this book dealing with the superiority of the *person* of Christ. In all of these early chapters, the question is asked: “*What do we have?*” What are our resources for living life in the present as we wait for the promised future?

The prologue in 1:1-4 answers that question by presenting Jesus as inheritor, creator, revealer, sustainer, redeemer and coming ruler. As such he is far superior to the angels – and for that matter, superior to anyone or anything that could compete for our heart affection and worship. And that is the whole argument of these first two chapters. Look at what you have in Christ. Consider Jesus! Don’t ignore him or his message! He is far superior to anything else or anyone else that might capture your attention and your affections.

Then last week we looked at 1:5-14. There, seven Old Testament passages are cited demonstrating that Jesus is God’s exalted King-Son, far superior to the angels. The five aspects of sonship, worship, kingship, workmanship, and rulership all point to the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ and the authority invested in him to rule. We saw that everything in these verses reaches its climax in verse 13: “To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”

Listen very carefully and read my lips. God’s King-Son, Jesus, will triumph over his enemies. The big “Ds” of discouragement, depression, disease, death and even demonic powers will be defeated and abolished. What a promise to encourage you and me to “slug it out” faithfully in the here and now as those who will someday be sharers with Jesus in his kingdom rule!

In light of all of this, here’s what the speaker tells us in 2:1-4. Follow along with me in your Bible.

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, 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 him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. Hebrews 2:1-4

See that little word “therefore” of verse 1? It’s often been said, and I’ll say it again, whenever you see a “therefore” or a “wherefore,” you must ask what it is there for? And *here*, it is *there* in order to link all that is said in chapter 1 to what now will be said in the first part of chapter 2. In other words, in light of the fact that Jesus Christ – as inheritor of the promises, creator of the universe, revealer of God the Father, sustainer of all things, redeemer of all who believe, and destined to triumph and rule over his enemies – is far superior to the mighty angels, *we better pay much closer attention to what we have heard from him.*

It’s really important that we understand this about the Christian life. Christianity is for both the mind and the heart. It touches both our intellect, emotions and will. Orthodoxy (what you believe) should always lead to orthopraxy (what you practice, how you live). And so as we come to chapter 2:1-4, we see that all the deep, rich truth of chapter 1 concerning the supremacy of the person of Christ is now brought down to the key issue of “What are you doing to do with it?” How does this truth of chapter 1 affect our lives in the present?

THE DANGER

First, we see here the danger that we need to be aware of. It’s found in the end of verse 1: “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, *so that we do not drift away.*”

For every one of us, there is the danger of “drifting away.” The word “drift” is only found here in the New Testament. But the word is used in the Old Testament. In Proverbs 3:21 it says, “Son, hold on to your wisdom and insight. Never let them *get away* from you” (*TEV*), literally, “slip away” from you. In the common usage of the day, it was used of things which “slip away.” A few weeks ago I pointed out that it could refer to a ring which could inconspicuously slip off a person’s finger or of a piece of food which slips down your throat the wrong way. Ever had that happen? You’re eating a meal and all of a sudden a piece of meat lodges itself in your throat? You didn’t anticipate it. It catches you by surprise. This word also referred at times to being caught in a strong current, causing you to miss your intended destination.

There are a lot of “strong currents” out there that can cause us to miss our intended destination. By “miss our destination,” I’m not referring to heaven or hell, but rather to the rich reward that God has in store for those who stay the course.

The hymn writer, Robert Robinson, put it this way, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.” That’s part of the last verse of the famous hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Robinson was only 23 years old when he wrote those words. And yet he too drifted in his later life, both morally and theologically. One day he was riding in a stagecoach with a lady who was humming this hymn he had written some years before. She asked him what he thought of the words. Robinson broke down into tears and said, “I am the poor unhappy man

who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then."ⁱ

How can you and I “drift” so easily in the Christian life? I decided the other day to read back through Hebrews with this idea in mind, asking myself: “How were these Hebrew believers “drifting away” in their faith?” How can you and I “drift?” I found several ways.

The first is found right here in our passage. It’s summed up in that little word “ignore” in verse 3: “How shall we escape if we *ignore* such a great salvation?” We’ve already pointed out that for the unbeliever that can mean *reject* the message of the gospel. And if you’re here today and have never received the gift of eternal life that God wants to give you, don’t reject it any longer. The consequences are terrible. Receive it. The Bible says, “But as many as *received* Him, to those who believe on his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

But to those who are already children of God, we can ignore this message, not so much by *rejecting* it, but by *neglecting* it. Few of us here outright *reject* the truth. Many of may *neglect* the truth. How do we do that? Well, the most obvious way is by failing to expose ourselves to the “means of grace” that God has given us: His Word, prayer and the Lord’s table (which we’ve shared today). Most of us don’t *reject* the Bible. We just *neglect* our Bibles. Charles Spurgeon once said, “There is enough dust on some of our Bibles to write ‘damnation’ with your fingers.” And when we neglect God’s Word, we are already beginning to drift.

This neglect of God’s means of grace will inevitably lead to hardness of heart. Hebrews 3:7 says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not *harden* your hearts.” This idea of a hardened heart is used repeatedly in this book (3:8, 13, 15; 4:7). It means literally “to make dry.”

I have a place in my front yard that’s like that. If you’ve visited my house, you know that I have a big sweet-gum tree in the front yard. I love that tree. It provides so much shade in the summer months and keeps our living room area nice and cool. But the problem is, it soaks up all the moisture in the ground. So no matter what I do to fertilize my grass in that area, I can’t get it to grow. The ground is hard and dry. And even when I water it, it can’t soak up the moisture. It all runs right off onto the sidewalk. By the way, if any of you landscapers have a solution, I would love to know what it is!

Is your heart that way? Hard, dry and resistant to the life-giving water, God’s Spirit? Usually, our hearts are often dry and resistant because there are other things that are taking all of our attention. Sort of like that sweet gum tree. It’s drinking up all of the moisture and there’s nothing left over for the grass. I don’t know about you, but I struggle with this in my Christian life. One of my biggest temptations is to be distracted by the good and to miss the best. The good can “soak up” all of my attention that I miss the best of intimacy with Jesus. That may be happening with some of you right now! You’re minds are distracted, wondering who’s going to win the Super Bowl this afternoon.

Are there certain corners of your life that you’ve shut off to God’s Word, saying, “OK, God, you can go so far, but no further.” Hard hearts need to become broken hearts in order to humbly receive the nourishment and refreshment that God wants to bring.

A third way in which these believers were “drifting” is by isolating themselves from other believers. Times were tough. Persecution was growing. There was the tendency to “go it alone.” They didn’t realize that to pull back from the church was to pull back from Christ. To drift away from the Body (the Church) was to drift away from the Head of the Body (Christ).

That’s why the speaker says in Hebrews 10:25 “let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...” I really believe that many Christians today just don’t get it. Our rugged American individualism blinds us to just how much we need others in the Body of Christ. We ignore the message of salvation by failing to assemble regularly with the local church. Why is that? Because isolation from the Body of Christ is isolation from the person of Christ. The two are inseparable.

Don’t ever think that you just “fell” into some sin in your life. We don’t “fall” into sin; we “drift” into sin. It always begins with a gradual, nearly inconspicuous slipping away. Don’t every think that when you see a Christian leader “fall” into sin, that it just happened to sneak up on him at an inopportune moment. There is always a subtle progression into sin. There is always a downward spiral. There is always a gradual “slipping away.” And the same is true in your life.

THE WARNING

That’s the danger – it’s the danger of drifting. But to emphasize the seriousness of this danger, we’re given a warning. It’s found in verses 2 and 3:

For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?
Hebrews 2:2-3a

Some believers just don’t want to hear what these stern warnings say to us.ⁱⁱ A simple way of avoiding their full force is to say that the writer is simply addressing *unbelievers* who may have been in the church.ⁱⁱⁱ But that doesn’t make sense. Notice how chapter 2 begins: “*We* must pay more careful attention.” Here and in the other warning passages in this book, the writer includes himself in the warning that he is about to give. There is absolutely no indication that the writer is addressing unbelievers who simply associated with the church.

G. H. Lang says, “The child of God deals deceitfully with the word of his Father and with his own soul when he refuses medicine because it is bitter.” The medicine God’s Word is about to give us here may be bitter, but it is exactly what we need. Don’t refuse it!

What is this medicine? The writer is using an argument from the lesser to the greater. We use this kind of reasoning all the time. Some might reason this way about the Super Bowl. If New York 10 and 6, but there playing New England with a record of 16 and 0, then we certainly we certainly know who will win the Super Bowl! (Though I, personally, am not in agreement with that conclusion!) So the writer is saying, “Look, if Israel was punished for ignoring the message that was delivered by angels, then how in the world do you think we will escape punishment if we ignore the message delivered by the Lord himself?”^{iv}

Of course, the pressing question is: Just what *is* this punishment, both here and in the four other warning passages in this letter? There is no reason to believe that it is hell. Why? First, hell is not

mentioned here. Nor is the writer speaking of hell in the four other warning passages of this book.

Second, the writer is comparing our situation to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. When the Israelites put that blood on their doors in Egypt and then passed through the Red Sea with Moses, they were “redeemed.” But as a “saved” or redeemed people, they experienced the discipline of God in the wilderness. In fact, an entire generation died as a result of disobedience. But were they a “saved” people when they died? Yes!

Thirdly, as we’ve already pointed out, the writer is clearly writing to believers and he includes himself in this warning. These believers are *not* in danger of hell. They have eternal life.

What then is this “just punishment” for neglecting our salvation? Part of the answer is found in what the writer is referring to when he speaks of “salvation” in this book. Our minds immediately go to *salvation from hell*, whereas the writer is talking about salvation in a much fuller sense.

This word “salvation” has already been used once in this letter. Its first use is found in 1:14 – “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who *will* inherit salvation?” Notice the future tense: “those who *will inherit* salvation.” We’ll be developing this concept as we go through our study in Hebrews. But for now, let me say this: to “inherit salvation” speaks of *future reward in heaven* and not *past salvation from hell*.^v And if this is the case, what is the “just punishment?” It’s *not* hell, but loss of reward in Christ’s future reign on this earth.^{vi}

This same teaching is found elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul speaks of those who will be saved, but “only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Corinthians 3: 15). He is saved, he escapes hell, but he does not escape the “just punishment” and the loss of reward spoken of in Hebrews 2.

THE REMEDY

So what is the remedy to avoid this “just punishment” and the loss of future reward? It’s not just a matter of paying attention. These readers were paying attention. They were at the gathering where this exhortation was first read. They had already believed in Christ and had made at least some progress in the faith, though they had not gone far. Notice, the writer doesn’t tell them and you and me to “pay attention,” but to pay “*more careful* attention:” “*We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard*, so that we do not drift away” (Hebrews 2:1).

The remedy parallels the danger. The very reason that we can so easily “slip away” into complacency and unbelief and disconnectedness to the Body of Christ is because we *think* we are paying attention, when what we really need is to pay *more careful* attention.

It’s sort of like driving a car these days with the technological gadgets that can distract us from where we’re going. Some think there great at multi-tasking. As you drive along I-205, the radio is tuned into Air One as you move to the music of Tobie Mack. Your cell phone is in your left hand, as you just got a call from your classmate. And your shifting your five-speed Honda with your right hand. Are you paying attention? Well, the average driver might say, “Sure I’m paying

attention...haven't had an accident in the last six months!" What that driver really needs is a kick duff to pay *even more careful attention!*

Some of us believers today are just like that. We're trying to "multi-task" in life, and our relationship with Christ is just one compartment of an already over-crowded life. We know we're headed to heaven. But our attention is "all over the map." We're really not paying attention as we should. And we're headed towards trouble. We're an accident waiting to happen.

What about you? Are you drifting? In what area of your life are you drifting? It can happen so quickly, so subtly. It's like that fishing experience with my Dad. Before I knew it we were over a mile from the shore and in dangerous waters. What is the remedy? Pay attention. Pay more careful attention. What is God saying to *you* today? In what area of your life is he calling you to listen up and give your full attention? Will you bring Jesus out of the "compartment" of your life that you've kept him in and give him your full attention? Will you stop drifting and start drawing near...drawing near to Jesus through his Word and through His people? Will you take that step today?

ⁱ <http://songsandhymns.org/hymns/detail/come-thou-fount-of-every-blessing>

ⁱⁱ This is the first of five warning passages in this book. Actually, these passages are intended to be an encouragement to you and me, but each one also carry with it a warning of the consequences if we don't pay attention:

- Warning one is *pay careful attention* (2:1-4)
- Warning two is *enter God's rest* (3:1-4:16)
- Warning three is *go on to maturity* (5:11-6:20)
- Warning four is *draw near, don't give up* (10:19-39)
- Warning five is *don't turn away* (12:25-29)

By the way, did you notice the subtle progression in the warning passages in this book? And I believe that the progression reflects the reality of life. We might say that the warning of these verses is rather "soft" compared to what is said later all. After all, he talks about "drifting" in these verses, while later on he'll talk about outright rejection. But temptation is like that, isn't it. Our affections grow cold, our hearts begin to harden, and before we know it, we find ourselves in a state of full out rebellion against God.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken this way, the "just punishment" of verse 3 refers to hell, as do the terrible consequences mentioned in the other four warning passages of this book. And yet the speaker tells us in 13:22 that some might have this tendency to pull back from these sharp, pointed exhortations. Here's what he says: "*Brothers*, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation..." Even though this book has so much doctrine, so much theology that at times is hard to grasp, the authors real intent is to bring all of this down to our daily lives.

^{iv} Compare Acts 7:53 – "...who have received the law that was put into effect *through angels* but have not obeyed it."

^v When we hear the word "salvation" we tend to think of passages such as Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5. Both of these passages speak of salvation in terms of "conversion" or "regeneration." But salvation in the Bible encompasses so much more than this. It is used in three tenses: past, present and future. The eternal destiny of the believer is sure; we are bound for heaven. But the degree to which we "inherit the kingdom" as partners reigning with Christ will be determined by our obedience in this present life. We also see in this passage that this salvation was first "announced by the Lord." What as the message that Jesus announced during his earthly ministry? He spoke much about inheriting the Kingdom of God. A simple reading of Matthew 5 and 25 will show the degree to which "inheriting the Kingdom" is based upon what we *do* in this life: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven," "Come, you who are blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." Why will these "inherit" the Kingdom? Because when He was hungry, they gave him to eat. The idea of inheriting the Kingdom is clearly related to our conduct in this life as believers.

^{vi} This is also implied in verse 4. The signs and wonders which confirmed the message spoken by Jesus Christ attest to the supernatural breakthrough of his kingdom rule which will one day take place.