

Sermon Summary #4

Such a Great Salvation! Hebrews 2:1-4

Jesus is better, or so the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews would have us believe. As good and great as was everything that preceded him during the time of the Old Covenant under Moses, Jesus is better. Jesus is immeasurably superior to anything your heart can conceive or your mind can imagine. Jesus Christ is God's full and final revelation to the world of what is good and true and beautiful and eternal. He is the one who by God's decree will inherit everything. He did, after all, create everything. He is the radiant effulgence of God's glory and the exact, precise expression and embodiment of what God is like. He bears up and carries along by his powerful word the whole of the universe so that what God has ordained to come to pass will in fact come to pass. By the sacrifice of himself on the cross he cleansed us from the defilement and stain of our sin and then sat down at the right hand of God on high.

As good and powerful and helpful as are the myriads of angels that God created and over which he rules, Jesus is better. He alone is the Son. The angels worship him. He does not worship them. His sovereign rule is forever and ever. He laid the foundation of the earth and the heavens are his handiwork. It was to Jesus Christ, and to no one else, that God the Father said: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

There are comparable statements concerning Jesus elsewhere in the NT. In the opening chapter of the Gospel of John we are told that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" . . . and that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). In Colossians 2:3 the apostle Paul says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." In Colossians 2:9 he says that in Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

So, how important is that to you? Do you regard it as of paramount, dare I say eternal, value, or is it at best mildly intriguing and momentarily of interest? Let me answer that question by quoting Hebrews 2:1 – "Therefore, we MUST pay MUCH CLOSER attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it."

I find it fascinating that here we encounter the first command or imperative or exhortation in the book of Hebrews. Chapter one is a glorious list of breathtaking assertions: Jesus is the creator, Jesus is the providential Lord over every particle in the universe, Jesus is God made visible, Jesus is seated at God's right hand, Jesus is eternal, and on and on and on. But there are no commands, demands, obligations, or responsibilities . . . that is, until we come to Hebrews 2:1.

It is here in 2:1 that we run smack dab into the force and urgency of the word "***therefore***" or as some translations render it, "***for this reason***." This is our author's way of saying, "***because***" Jesus is God's final word to mankind and "***because***" Jesus is himself God and "***because***" Jesus is the creator and sustainer and providential Lord over all things and "***because***" Jesus is infinitely superior to the angels, we must pay much closer attention to what we've heard about him and read of him and have come to know about him.

Pay very, very close attention to what you've just read. Listen very, very intently to what you've just heard. This isn't optional. This isn't on the level of good advice. This goes far beyond a mere suggestion. This is a matter of immediate, constant, eternal urgency.

Listen to me: Every one of you is going to die! Every person in this auditorium is going to die, whether within seconds or years or decades, all of us will die. Whether by cancer, a car accident, war, heart disease, old age, or by some other means, be it peaceful or violent, slowly or swiftly, you are all going to die. And when you do there will only be one thing that ultimately matters. Only one thing will determine what happens next, be it heaven or hell.

And that one thing, in the words of Hebrews 2:1, is whether or not, before you died, you paid much closer attention to what the biblical text said about Jesus Christ. You can't wait until after you die. It will then be too late.

I know that many of you pay very close attention to the news: to stories of war and national upheaval and the mysterious disappearance of airplanes and the frequency of earthquakes. I know that many of you closely follow the fluctuations in the stock market and the price of gold. I know that you listen intently to the music on your I-pod and carefully read every email, text, and tweet that is sent your way. I know that you devote hours to watching TV and surfing the internet and conversing with friends. But when you die, none of that will matter. The only thing that matters eternally, and therefore ought to matter now, is what you do with this person known as Jesus of Nazareth, this person of whom these stunning statements are made in Hebrews 1.

This may be the first but it isn't the last time we'll hear this urgent plea in Hebrews. In Hebrews 3:1 we will be told to "consider" Jesus and in 12:2 to "look" to Jesus. And why should we do this? Why *must* we do this? ***Because only in and through and because of Jesus do we have access to what our author describes in 2:3 as "such a great salvation"!***

If you should choose *not* to pay close attention to Jesus and *not* to consider him and look to him and think of him and pursue him and study him and trust him and love him, I say again, if you should choose *not* to heed this exhortation, if instead you choose to "neglect" (v. 3) this great salvation that he has provided and in doing so "drift away from it" (v. 1), you will not "escape" (v. 3) eternal judgment.

So why would anybody *not* respond to this urgent exhortation in Hebrews 2:1? Given what we've seen and heard in Hebrews 1 concerning Jesus, what possible excuse would anyone have, what possible explanation could they give for *not* paying much closer attention to who Jesus is and what he has done? The only reason would be that such folk regard other things as more valuable and more beautiful and more satisfying and better than Jesus.

And if you choose not to pay close, consistent, daily, heartfelt attention to the good news of God about Jesus of Nazareth, what will happen? Our author says it as clearly as anyone possibly could: you quite likely will begin to "drift away" from it. What does he mean by this?

The Greek word translated "***drift away***" occurs nowhere else in all the NT. But it is found frequently in other, extra-biblical, literature. For example, it describes an arrow slipping from the quiver, or snow sliding down a mountain side, or a ring slipping off a finger. But it seems clear that here in Hebrews 2 our author has in mind a nautical metaphor in which a ship is seen slowly drifting out to sea and past the dock where it should have been secured. In Hebrews 6:19 our author speaks of Christian hope as "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." Thus the gospel of salvation is portrayed as a solid, fixed, and immovable port to which we must carefully anchor ourselves.

I want us to think about the nature of "drifting" away, as our author describes it. Do you know what you have to do to drift? *Nothing!* Don't do anything, and you will drift. Take Christianity lightly, and you will drift from it. Treat it casually or not at all, and you will drift from it.

Merely showing up at a church service like this one is no proof that you *aren't* drifting. In fact, most who drift are regular in their church attendance. They are regular because they believe the lie that being physically present in a service is the antithesis of drifting. Either you are here on Sunday or you are drifting. No. The antithesis of drifting isn't merely being present. It is listening to, paying heed to, believing in, growing in love for, and devoting your entire life to Jesus. Being present in a church service or attending a small group or volunteering in children's ministry doesn't mean you aren't drifting and in danger of perishing. But these activities are an expression of what it means to hold fast to Jesus and to adore him and prize and treasure him.

Some of you here today are drifting. You see the gospel every week. You hear the gospel often. You are told of Jesus. You may even read your Bible. But you do not diligently and passionately pay close attention to the gospel of what God has done for sinners in Jesus. There is no focused or fixed faith in Jesus, no pursuit of him, no desire to grow in knowledge about him. You are standing still. You think that because you are not actively running away or living in open and unrepentant rebellion that you are o.k. But you are drifting.

I once read a story about the English explorer William Edward Parry who took a crew with him to the Arctic Ocean. They had carefully chartered their course but decided to go farther north to learn even more about this largely unexplored part of the world. So they calculated their position by the stars and began a treacherous and difficult journey. They walked hour after hour after hour until they stopped from sheer exhaustion. Once again taking their bearings from the stars, they discovered that they were farther south than they had been when they started. They had been walking on an ice floe that was imperceptibly moving south faster than they were walking north.

I fear that many people who regularly attend church and think of themselves as either spiritual or religious are doing much the same thing. They think they are making progress and moving forward in their relationship with God, all the while they are drifting farther and farther away from him.

John Piper uses a slightly different image but with the same point. “The life of this world,” Piper once said, “is not a lake. It is a river. And it is flowing downward to destruction. If you do not listen earnestly to Jesus and consider him daily and fix your eyes on him hourly, then you will not stand still, you will go backward. You will float by” (John Piper, *The Danger of Drifting from the Word*, April 28, 1996). The alternative that brings life and salvation and hope is to listen attentively to what God says about Jesus and to invest your faith in what God has done in and through Jesus.

“Come on Sam. Does it really matter all that much? How do we know you aren’t blowing this out of proportion? Maybe you’re saying this because *you* want to be the topic of conversation at lunch when we leave here in a few minutes.” Well, I can’t stop you from thinking that. All I can do is to point you to what our author says of the urgency and importance of this matter.

He says it in v. 2 and in the first half of v. 3. Let’s look at it.

“For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (2:2-3a).

The “message” here is clearly the Mosaic Law, God’s revelation of himself and his will in the Old Covenant. As I noted last week, both Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19 tell us that in some sense angels served as instruments or intermediaries in the giving of that Law. And everything that God communicated through angels was absolutely “reliable” which is to say it was perfect and trustworthy. Therefore it was altogether good and just for God to punish those who transgressed and disobeyed the dictates of the Mosaic Law.

Most agree that the “just retribution” for violating some principle of the Mosaic Law was, at worst, physical death. That was as extreme as it got in terms of punishment. Our author then argues from the lesser to the greater. ***If there was such severe retribution from God for violating the terms of a lesser covenant mediated by angels, surely there will be even worse retribution for violating the terms of a greater covenant brought to us by God’s very Son.*** And what could be worse than physical death? Spiritual or eternal death! In other words, what is at stake in “drifting away” from and “neglecting” the salvation that has come in Christ is your eternal destiny.

One of the unmistakable signs that you are a true child of God, born again and justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ, is that if you are drifting you won’t continue in it for long. If you a true child of God you will hear this message and feel the pain in your conscience which is the Holy Spirit bringing conviction. The evidence that you are true child of God is that you will sense a desire to turn your eyes and ears and heart back upon Jesus and be attentive and devoted to who he is and what he says and all that he has done. And one of the signs that you may not be born again or justified by faith alone in Christ alone is that my words and the warning of Hebrews 2 makes little to no impact on your heart. You hear this and shrug your shoulders indifferently or set it aside as the ranting of some fanatical preacher.

Some of you are no doubt wondering what this means for the doctrine of eternal security or the notion that the true, born-again child of God, cannot apostatize or lose their salvation. I will speak to that issue later on in Hebrews, but let me briefly say this about it.

There are generally three options. Arminians believe that born-again and justified believers can “drift away” and “neglect” their salvation and in doing so can lose or forfeit their salvation. Another view is that passages such as this

have nothing to do with the loss of salvation but rather with the loss of reward in the age to come. What the Christian suffers for having neglected and drifted away from their salvation is the joy and blessing of those rewards that they otherwise would have been given at the judgment seat of Christ. They are still saved, but they suffer the loss of reward and blessing in the future.

The Calvinist argues that the born-again and justified-by-faith-in-Christ believer cannot lose his/her salvation; God *will* preserve and protect him/her from such apostasy. Thus the Calvinist reads Hebrews 2 and other such texts in the light of what our author later says in Hebrews 3:14 –

“For we have come [past tense] to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (Heb. 3:14).

He refers in the latter half of the verse to our “original confidence” in Christ. Clearly he is describing the initial act of faith when a man or woman claims to have put their trust in Jesus for salvation. If a person who professes to have “confidence” in Christ, a person who claims to have trusted him for salvation holds firmly in this faith all the way “to the end” (a likely reference to the “end” of his life) this proves that they truly “have come to share in Christ.” Perseverance provides evidence of the reality of one’s claim to know Jesus.

How can we know whether or not someone genuinely shares in Christ, which is to say, is born-again and is justified and is a child of God? We can know by observing whether or not they have held that original confidence firm to the end. Note well: the author does not say that if you hold that confidence firm to the end you “*will*” be one who shares in Christ. He says, rather, that we “*have come*” (past tense) to “share in Christ” if “we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” In other words, it is one’s on-going, future perseverance in faith or their consistent abiding in their confidence in Christ all the way to the end that serves to demonstrate or prove that they genuinely came to share in Christ in the past.

Also note that he does not say if you fail to hold firm your original confidence this means you once had it but later lost it. Rather, if you fail to hold it, it means you never had it at all. If someone does not hold firmly to the end of this “faith” or “confidence” that he/she claims to have put in Christ, this reveals that they never truly and sincerely shared in Christ in the first place.

Perhaps it will help you see what our author is saying if we state it negatively. “We have *not* come to share in Christ, if indeed we do *not* hold our original confidence firm to the end.” His point again is that if you are born again and have thus come to share in Christ, if you were justified and forgiven of your sins and adopted in God’s family by faith, you cannot fail to persevere. You *will* hold your original confidence firm unto the end.

Thus, holding firm, not drifting, not neglecting our great salvation, is the *evidence* or *proof* that we genuinely trusted Christ in the first place. Conversely, to drift or neglect or walk away from Christ, that is to say, to abandon whatever original “confidence” one claimed to experience is to demonstrate that one was never “in Christ” in the first place.

Simply put, perseverance is the proof of salvation. ***No perseverance, no salvation; not because you had it but lost it, but because you never had it at all.*** So let me say it again as clearly as I can. Our author is *not* telling us what *will* be true *if* a person endures to the end but rather what is *already true*. A person’s endurance or perseverance in faith and obedience is the evidence of their vital, saving connection to Christ and their participation in him.

Regardless of where you land on this issue, we need to be clear about one thing: ***the NT nowhere teaches that an initial “acceptance” of the saving message is sufficient without perseverance in faith.***

Here is where the Arminian and the Calvinist are in agreement. Both insist that if you do not listen to Jesus and look to Jesus and remain faithful to Jesus you will suffer eternal destruction. The Arminian believes this happens when those who are truly saved fall away. Calvinists believe this happens when those who claim to be saved, but aren’t, drift away, thereby demonstrating that their alleged “faith” was spurious and superficial. In either case, not staying true to Jesus, not persevering in love for Jesus, results in eternal death.

As I said, we’ll return to this issue on several occasions in the days ahead.

Why this is such a Serious Subject

But for now I want to remind everyone why this “drifting away” from and “neglecting” of what Christ has done for sinners is so gravely important. Our author mentions two reasons.

First, the salvation provided for sinners by Jesus Christ is exceedingly and indescribably “great”! This is no mundane salvation, no routine deliverance, no run-of-the-mill forgiveness. In Christ God has redeemed us from slavery to sin, has wiped clean the stain of guilt and shame, has removed all grounds for condemnation, has forgiven us freely and fully if only we would trust and treasure Christ and what he did on the cross. In Christ God has reconciled us to himself, has adopted us into his family, has imputed the righteousness of Jesus to us and declared that we are acceptable in his sight, has put his Spirit in our hearts as an abiding presence and promise that the work he has begun in us he will fully and finally bring to consummation.

This salvation is great because through it we are brought into loving and heartfelt intimacy with the Creator of the universe! This salvation is great because it restores hope to the despairing and brings freedom to the enslaved and enables the shameful to feel clean and takes the depressed and gives them joy and grants purpose to those who feel useless and gives value to those who say “I’m worthless.”

Wow! Now that’s a great salvation! And that’s why the threat of “drifting away” from it and “neglecting” it is so real and frightening and foreboding.

Second, the urgency of paying close attention to this salvation and fixing our faith on Jesus alone is of massive importance because of the way God confirmed the truth of the gospel. Notice that there are three stages in this process of confirmation.

- (1) Jesus Christ himself declared that he had come to save sinners. His word of forgiveness and redemption for those who trust and treasure him was proclaimed loudly and clearly and with the self-authenticating power of his divine authority.
- (2) Those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus while he was on the earth, who saw him and heard him and walked with him, in turn told us about their experience. They bore testimony that all he did and said was real and true. They were present when he cleansed the lepers and drove out demons and walked on water and refuted the Pharisees and raised the dead.
- (3) In turn, God the Father also bore witness to the truth of this message of salvation by granting signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Such displays of divine power confirmed and attested to the reality of all that Jesus claimed to be.

Let me say three quick things about this that many misunderstand.

First, there is nothing in this passage that suggests God cannot or does not or will not continue to attest to and confirm the truth of the gospel through supernatural spiritual displays of power. Some try to argue that since we have the Bible we no longer need such miracles or spiritual gifts to confirm the truth of the gospel. ***But the Bible itself nowhere says that! Nowhere in Scripture are we told that the Bible replaces miracles or that the gospel cannot still be confirmed by supernatural displays of power. Nowhere! If supernatural displays of power and the operation of spiritual gifts confirmed the truth of the gospel of salvation back then, why could they not continue to do so today?***

Second, the word translated “bore witness” sound as if it is in the past tense, as if to suggest that God *used* to do this, that in the past he formerly bore witness by signs and wonders, but that he no longer does so in the present day. But the participle translated “bore witness” is in the present tense in Greek! Although that doesn’t prove my point, it certainly makes room for it (both grammatically and theologically). It means that it is entirely within the realm of possibility that even in the time during which the recipients of this letter were living God was *still* bearing witness to the truth of the gospel through signs, wonders, miracles, and spiritual gifts.

Third, even if God no longer uses miraculous events to confirm or attest to the truth of the gospel (although I believe he does), spiritual gifts have other purposes they serve. Paul clearly teaches that all spiritual gifts, even the more overtly miraculous ones, serve the “common good” or are for the benefit and building up of the body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:7-10). The gift of prophecy is designed by God to encourage, console, and edify believers (1 Cor. 14:3). Every spiritual gift is used to strengthen and build up believers in the church. And that is a purpose they serve that will never come to an end until Jesus himself returns in the clouds. In other words, ***while acknowledging that supernatural displays of miraculous power served to authenticate and confirm the truth of the gospel, never think that such was their only purpose. Nowhere does the NT reduce the purpose of the miraculous to attestation and confirmation. Nowhere!***

Of course, it is always possible for you to doubt the truthfulness of such claims. You may be inclined to say, “Why should I believe anything Jesus said? Maybe he was lying. Or maybe he never even said what the NT says he said; after all, it could have been fabricated by the early church. And why should we believe what his followers said about him? Maybe they made it up. It could all have been a conspiracy on their part to elevate Jesus to the status of God. And maybe all those alleged miracles and spiritual gifts were sleight of hand. I’ve seen magicians in Las Vegas do some incredible things, all of which were just misdirection and deception.”

Sure, there is always the *possibility* that such is the case. So why do I affirm the high degree of *probability* that Jesus is who Hebrews says he is and that he accomplished for sinners what it says he accomplished?

I could begin by enumerating for you the countless lines of historical, archaeological, philosophical, and logical evidence for the truth claims of Christ. I could talk about how OT prophecy is so remarkably fulfilled in the NT, how only a bodily resurrection accounts for the empty tomb, how Christian theism alone makes sense of the existence of the universe and its undeniably remarkable design, how we have no other way to explain the emergence of the early Christian movement and its phenomenal growth through the centuries, and so on seemingly without end.

But in the final analysis the only thing that will lead you to embrace the truth of who Jesus Christ claims to be so that you will put your faith in what he has claimed to do is the work of the Holy Spirit in opening your eyes and shining into your heart and soul the knowledge of the glory of God as revealed in Jesus. This is Paul’s word to us in 2 Corinthians 4:6, and it is my prayer for you today if you do not yet see in Jesus the Son of God, the heir of all things, the creator of the universe, the radiant expression of God’s glory and exact imprint of his character, the one who is carrying all things to their proper end by the word of his power, the one who has made purification for sins and sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

We pray, O Father, shine this light into every heart and drive out the darkness of rebellion, skepticism, and unbelief, and grant us sight of your glory as revealed in the face of Jesus.