

“Don’t Neglect Such a Great Salvation!”

Heb. 2:1-4

- INTRO. - The greatest tragedy (in all of eternity) is the reality that hell will be filled with those who drifted past heaven without attaining it! Those who were very close to the door of heaven but never entered it. Those who knew the truth of the gospel but never embraced it by saving faith in Christ.

- That is what the author of Hebrews is warning about in 2:1-4. Here (in this passage) we come to the first exhortation in this *sermon* we call Hebrews. These are usually referred to as “the warning passages” – and there are 5 of them in this book, beginning with this one.

- You know, one of the most important aspects of good, biblical preaching is what the Bible calls “exhortation.” In fact, the author of this book calls this entire sermon a “word of exhortation” (in 13:22).

- That has to do with calling upon God’s people (and the lost) to *do* something in light of the truth of God’s Word. Every good sermon will call upon the hearers to respond in some way to the revelation of God’s truth. It is the part of the sermon that says, “This is what we must do in response to the things God has revealed.”

- Well, 2:1-4 is the first exhortation in this sermon. We’re taking Hebrews as a NT sermon, and this is the point at

which the author stops to say, “In light of these truths, this is how you must respond.”

- And what we find (here in this first exhortation) is one of the most sobering warnings to be found *anywhere* in the Word of God. And right here (in the middle of his treatise on angels) we find an invitation. There is an invitation to respond to what his hearers have learned.

- As with all good invitations, it includes *both* exhortation and warning – *not only* what you should *do*, but also what will happen if you *don’t*. And in this case, the invitation has to do with the great salvation of God.

- But we have to start with the question of, “To whom is he making this appeal?” And I want you to listen very closely (at this point) because this is one of the most important keys to properly understanding this book.

- First of all, this appeal cannot be to Christians – because they are *never* in danger of “neglecting” salvation (in the sense of not receiving it) – because they already have it. They may neglect the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life (and things pertaining to sanctification) but they can never neglect the reception of God’s salvation because they already have it.

- This appeal has to be to the lost, but it can’t really be for those who have never heard the gospel, because it is impossible to “neglect” something that you don’t even

know exists. That word implies that they know about it but they have not taken any action on it.

- This is why the only logical conclusion is that this warning is for those who have heard the gospel (and perhaps are even intellectually convinced of its truth) but have failed to respond to it in saving faith.

- And remember, we talked about this in the introduction to the book. If this is (in fact) a NT sermon, then it should *not* surprise us that it is directed at different groups that might hear its message.

- Although these are likely Jews (being addressed), there are those who are already believers, there are those who are *not* even close to becoming believers, and there are those who *are* very close to becoming believers.

- I believe it is this *last* group the author has in mind in this passage. The language in this exhortation *assumes* that those being appealed to have heard (and know) the message of salvation. These are those who know the truth of the gospel – and (perhaps) have even acknowledged its truthfulness (its rightness), but have fallen short of making a commitment to Christ.

- Now, someone might raise the objection, “Then why does he use the plural pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’?” This is one of the main reasons why most commentators say this of for believers.

- But let me ask you, “Do you think the author of Hebrews is saying that he (personally) has neglected the salvation of God? Do you think he is admitting (here) that he is *not* a Christian?” Of course not. Then what is he doing? He is identifying himself with his fellow Jews (including those who have *not* yet made a commitment to Christ).

- John MacArthur writes, “The ‘us’ is the us of nationality or of all those who have heard the truth. The author’s willingness to identify himself with his readers does *not* mean he is in the same spiritual condition as they are.”

- Another commentator wrote, “By using the first person plural *we* and *us*, the author brings a warmth as well as a directness and urgency to his address, as he identifies with his listeners.”

- Preachers do this kind of thing all the time. It’s like saying, “All of us who have heard the gospel should commit to it.” And yet, we all know – if I say something like that this morning – that there are a number of us who have already done that.

- This is a collective “we” and a collective “us.” It is a way of identifying with his hearers. But the conclusion I have to come to (after studying this passage) is that it is directed to those who have heard the gospel (and perhaps

know it well) but have failed to make a commitment to Jesus Christ.

- All of us know people like that. We know people who have come to the place of saying, “Yes, I believe that Jesus is the true Savior, and I know I need Him in my life, but I am *not* ready to make a commitment to Him.”

- In many ways, they are like someone who is stranded on an island, and there is a boat waiting at the shore to rescue them – and they say, “Yes, I believe in the boat (I believe it is real and that it can save me),” but they are unwilling to get into the boat.

- And this is one of the greatest tragedies of all time! They are so close to salvation, but they are in grave danger of missing it forever. They are right at the door, but they have *not* yet stepped through it.

- As John MacArthur puts it, “this warning is to those who have heard the gospel, know the facts about Jesus Christ, know that He died for them, that He desires to forgive their sins, that He can give them new life, but are *not* willing to confess Him as their Lord and Savior.”

- And even though the audience (here) is likely Jewish, the warning is not limited to unbelieving Jews – it is for all those who are on the edge of commitment to Christ, but have *not* yet made that commitment.

- So with that in mind, let’s move (now) into this passage and examine it carefully. It is comprised of three elements, and the first one is:

### I. A CAUTION ABOUT COMPACENCY (v. 1)

- Look with me at v. 1, “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away *from it*.” Some translations begin this verse with the word “therefore” and this points back to all he has said about Christ in chapter 1.

- In other words, “In light of who Christ really is, how could anyone ever fail to commit himself fully to Him? In light of the fact that Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity – the One who created all things, holds all things together and will inherit all things – and in light of the fact that He has made purification for our sins – how could anyone ever fail to receive Him as Lord and Savior?”

- In light of the fact that He is fully God, and is God’s final and complete revelation to men – and the fact that He is seated on an eternal throne, worshipped by the angels – how could anyone fail to embrace Him as the exalted Lord of all?

- Anyone who would fail to do that, should be considered a fool above all fools. “There’s the boat – why won’t you get in it? There’s the door – why won’t you go through it?”

- It is clear from v. 3 that the issue is “salvation,” and I believe the phrase “what we have heard” refers to the gospel. It is that which has been revealed by God in His Son – so it would include, *not only* what is covered in chapter 1, but *also* the message of the gospel they had previously heard.

- Now, the terms that are used in v. 1 paint a graphic picture of this great tragedy. I want to start with the word that is translated (in the NASB) “drift away from it.” This word is a nautical term, and it really means “to drift past.”

- The idea that is being communicated here (I believe) is of a boat that quietly drifts past the safe harbor and out into the perils of the deep sea. And the whole idea is that a person is so close to being in the safety of the harbor, but they just drift right past it.

- Now, this is a powerful analogy, because there is nothing as imperceptible as a drifting boat. It doesn't require any exertion of energy. In fact, you could be *asleep* in the boat, but all the time it would be drifting. Perhaps a modern equivalent of this word would be, “Just go with the flow.”

- My friend listen – here's what you have to do to go to hell – ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! If you fail to commit yourself to Jesus Christ, you will slip right into hell – even if you come close to receiving Him.

- The verb that is used (here for “drift”) is in the passive voice – which means that this is something that is done *to* you. In other words, you don't have to do a thing, and your sin nature will carry you right into hell.

- But listen, even though it is in the passive voice here, the Bible makes it clear that you *can* do something about it. You can stop the drift. You can respond in such a way as to land you in the safe harbor.

- That's why the author of Hebrews makes the plea, “You'd better pay much closer attention to the message you have heard!” The Greek verb used here is in the emphatic form. It means, “You cannot afford to let these truths slip through your mind without committing yourself to them.”

- In fact, *both* of these words have a nautical connotation. The idea of *this* word is, make sure you tie the boat down (in the safe harbor) and *not* let it slip out to sea.

- Think about it – the vast majority of people in hell did *not* end up there intentionally – they simply drifted into it. These Jews were *not* rejecting salvation – they were neglecting it.

- Most people do *not* shake their fists in the face of God and defiantly curse at Him. No, they just fail to receive the Son of God. They simply drift (imperceptibly) past the harbor of eternal salvation, and right into eternal damnation.

## II. A COMPARISON OF COVENANTS (vv. 2-3a)

- By the way, the author does not identify the “currents” that might cause someone to slip past the harbor of salvation, but there are potentially *many* of them. A person may *not* want to commit to Christ because they are *not* ready to repent of some immoral lifestyle. They may be fearful of what other people may think of them. They may have family members that would *not* support them in becoming a Christian (in fact, might disown them).

- So there might be a number of “currents” that could result in a person drifting past the safe harbor of salvation, but the warning is, that you’d better *not* risk your eternal destiny.

- That’s the warning here. Now, if you have the KJV, that translation seems to imply that it is the *gospel* that slips. No, it’s *not* the gospel that slips – it is men that slip past the gospel. It is men that slip by the safe harbor of salvation.

- The word “must” conveys urgency and necessity. It’s in the imperative mood. In other words, this is *not* an option. This is *not* something you should do if it is convenient. This is *not* something you can afford to just put off until you are ready. NO, this is an urgent necessity!

- So there is a caution about complacency – but secondly there is:

- Look now at v. 2, “For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

- This is a comparison of two covenants. The “word spoken through angels” is the old covenant – the Law given to Moses. I’ve already dealt with the fact that the Scripture indicates that the angels were involved as mediators of the old covenant. So I won’t go back through that again.

- The “so great salvation” is the new covenant brought through the Son of God. And this is a warning of certain judgment for failing to embrace the gospel – the new covenant. If there was strict and certain judgment for the transgression of the Law, then *how much more* will there be severe judgment for failing to avail yourself to the salvation God has provided through Christ.

- This is an “a fortiori” argument (or an argument from lesser to greater). The Jews called this “light and heavy.” So in this case, the lighter judgment would be the violation of the old covenant, while the heavier would be for the neglect of the new covenant provision of salvation.

- But let’s look carefully at v. 2. The word “if” (there) should read “since.” It has the meaning of, “since this is

true.” It was true that there were severe penalties (under the old covenant) for transgressing God’s Law.

- For major offenses there was the death penalty, for lesser offenses there was restitution. And (by the way) this was true even when the transgression was the result of neglect or ignorance.

- *All* disobedience to God’s Law carried some kind of “recompense.” Now, if you have the KJV it says “reward,” but this is *not* speaking of a “reward” in the way *we* use that word. This is clearly punishment here. If you violate God’s Law you pay a price.

- But again, the main message here, is that you pay an even greater price if you neglect the great salvation God has provide in the new covenant. This is why the author of Hebrews pleads with his audience to pay much closer attention to the message of the gospel they had heard.

- The transgression of the Law brought about severe *temporal* punishments, but the neglect of the gospel brings severe *eternal* punishment.

- Now, both of the words that are used for “sin” (here in v. 2) amount to a conscious rejection of God’s will. “Transgression” means to go beyond the boundaries God has set. It literally means, “to step across the line.”

- “Disobedience” literally is an “unwillingness to hear.” In this context it means, “neglecting to carefully hear God’s word and obey it.”

- Either of those violations (under the old covenant) brought about a “just recompense.” The phrase “proved unalterable” (in the NASB) conveys the idea of certainty. It means it was binding. You couldn’t escape the consequences.

- This word was used in the papyri in the sense of a legally binding security. In other words, this is guaranteed by God. And the use of the word “every” (here) indicates that this was true of each individual violation of God’s law.

- And if that is true for the old covenant, it is even more certain for the new. And that is exactly what he says in v. 3, “...how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

- This is a rhetorical question that implies a negative answer. In other words, “there is absolutely no way you will escape eternal punishment if you neglect the great salvation that has come through Jesus Christ!”

- If it is impossible to escape the penalty for sin brought about by the covenant mediated by angels, then it will be even more impossible to escape the judgment that result in neglecting the salvation brought by the Son of God.

- And notice that the salvation brought by Christ is referred to as “so great a salvation.” Why is it referred to in that way? I believe it is referred to this way because it is totally based on God’s grace. It is a great salvation because we don’t deserve it, and can never earn it in any way. We simply receive it by grace through faith in Christ.

- It is also great because it is the only thing that can set us free from the shackles of sin, and cleanse our hearts, and make us completely righteous before God. This great salvation in Christ is *not* the *best* way to heaven – it is the *only* way. There is only one door, only one way, only one Savior.

- The salvation that God has provided in His Son is (indeed) a GREAT salvation – and that is why it is so foolish to neglect it. Anyone who *does* fail to embrace it will pay the ultimate price.

- Now, the author of Hebrews does *not* spell out (here) that punishment, but the rest of the NT does. It is eternal separation from God in a place called hell.

- People (in our day and time) don’t like to hear about punishment for sin (especially eternal punishment). ILL. – Speaking at a gay rights demonstration in the mid-1980s, a New York bishop stated triumphantly that the conception of a god who punishes for such ‘so-called

sins’ as homosexuality stems from ‘primitive, barbaric passages of the Old Testament.’”

- But please understand, there is just as much about this in the New Testament (and maybe more). Jesus spoke of hell more than anyone else in history. Why? Because He knows it’s real. All the apostles clearly taught it as well.

- So we can’t change our message just because something the Bible declares is *not* popular. As George Guthrie wrote, “To preach the Scriptures faithfully means that we address all the topics Scripture addresses, including the topic of punishment.”

- He says, “That topic, although uncomfortable to communicate and hear, is nonnegotiable for those who would preach biblically.” So we see a caution about complacency, a comparison of covenants – thirdly we see:

### III. A CONFIRMATION OF CHRISTIANITY (vv. 3b-4)

- Go back to v. 3 and look at the second half, “After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.”

- This is a three-fold confirmation of Christianity – and the Bible tells us that a three-fold chord cannot be easily broken. The message of salvation was first given by Christ Himself, then by His apostles, and finally it was confirmed by God the Father.

- The message of God’s salvation was proclaimed (first of all) by “the Lord.” That clearly speaks of Christ. F. F. Bruce writes, “It had, of course, been proclaimed in advance by the prophets; but not until the coming of Christ, when promise gave place to fulfillment, could it be effectively brought near.”

- Jesus Christ came proclaiming the good news of the kingdom – the good news of God’s salvation. He declared Himself as the only way of salvation. He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.” (John 14:6)

- The apostles came along (in the Book of Acts) and declared, “...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

- But God the Father confirmed the message of the gospel through supernatural signs and wonders. These miracles confirmed *both* the words and ministry of Christ, *and* of His apostles.

- Jesus said (in John 10:38), “...though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and

understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.” In other words, if you can’t believe the *message*, at least believe the *miracles*.

- When Jesus claimed to be God, He went on and did things that only God can do, and that proved His claim. On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter reminded the people, “Jesus the Nazarene, [was] a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know...”

- They couldn’t deny His miracles. Those were mighty works that were actually, literally performed publicly – and many of them saw them with their own eyes. The signs and wonders that accompanied Jesus’ ministry were undeniable confirmations of His deity and His authority.

- No one else ever walked on water. No one else ever calmed the sea with His word. No one else ever raised the dead or caused blind men to see or commanded demons as He did.

- And (of course) this same kind of miraculous confirmation was given by God to His Apostles. Until the NT could be canonized, there was a need for the word of the apostles to be confirmed in this manner.

- The Apostles were the ones who established “sound doctrine” and there were many false prophets around to

distort the truth of the gospel – so this was an important aspect of the confirmation of their ministry.

- As I'm sure you know, the apostles (including Paul) were able to perform incredible miracles in the name of Christ – and these miracles confirmed their authority as His apostles.

- As Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 12:12, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.” They did the same kind of miracles Jesus did. They raised the dead, they healed the sick, they cast out demons. There was no doubt about God's confirmation of their authority.

- And in addition to that, (going back to Heb. 2:4) He also gave to them “gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.” These were the “miracle sign gifts.” These were the spiritual gifts that were given (temporarily) to the apostles (and their associates) until the NT was complete.

- These consisted of four gifts: tongues, the interpretation of tongues, the gift of healing, and the specific gift called “miracles.” We believe these gifts have ceased. They were given specifically for the confirmation of the ministry of the Apostles, and when the Apostles passed from the scene, so did these gifts.

- Now, I don't have time (this morning) to make the case for cessationism, but the point (here in Hebrews) is that

God provided this three-fold confirmation of the new covenant. Christianity is absolutely confirmed by God.

- There is no longer a reason for these kinds of miracles (or miraculous gifts) because the gospel is firmly established in the NT. We now have everything we need for life and godliness. We now have God's final revelation to man. We don't need those miracles any longer.

- And yet (having said that) it is important to recognize that the author of Hebrews ties Christianity (and the message of salvation) specifically to real events that actually occurred in history.

- One reason this is so important is because the modern church has been greatly influenced by the teaching of Rudolph Bultmann, who made a sharp distinction between “the Jesus of history” and “the Christ of faith.”

- *That* has led to the ridiculous quest for the “historical Jesus” (and to things like “the Jesus seminar,” where theologians vote with colored beads on whether they believe certain things were actually said or done by Jesus) – but folks, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one and the same!

- Christianity has been historically, and literally, confirmed by God in a supernatural way. And the key miracle – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – is the cornerstone of our faith.

missing) the eternal salvation God has made available to us in His Son.

- MAKE APPEAL

- PRAYER

- As Paul said in 1 Cor. 15, if Christ is *not* raised (historically, literally) then our preaching is in vain, and our faith is useless, and we are still in our sins.

- So this is *not* just some sort of theological trivia – it is a critical aspect of Christianity. God has absolutely confirmed it in a way that only He could.

- CONCL. – So what is the bottom line message of this passage? You'd better *not* neglect such a great salvation! You'd better *not* drift past the harbor of salvation! It is possible to be very close to it, and still miss it.

- ILL. – An evangelist tells the story of being in a church in Mississippi, and there happened to be a man who accidentally backed over his four year old daughter with his care and killed her. It was an accident, but it was one that was caused by sheer neglect.

At the funeral, the man was crying over his precious little girl, and he said to his pastor, “There could never be a greater case of neglect than what I have done to my innocent child.” The evangelist said, “No, you’re wrong. It will be far worse for you if you go on carelessly neglecting the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ!”

- Yes, there are great tragedies in this life – but there is no greater tragedy than that of neglecting (and therefore