

Hebrews 2:1-4
“A Warning Not to Drift Away”

Introduction:

The author now turns to the first of the warnings that are woven throughout the body of the letter. In this warning the author was addressing a key motivation behind his readers' temptation to return to Judaism; their fear of the persecution and hardship that they were enduring because of their allegiance to Christ. This was a real and genuine concern. So, in the author's attempt to persuade his readers to persevere, he needed to do, as he did here, address their fears and give them compelling reasons to persevere that outweigh those fears. The first reason that the author gives as to why his readers needed to persevere was rooted in the reality that Christ was superior to the angels.

I. The Serious Nature of the Gospel: (vs.1-3a)

The author opens up this passage with an exhortation, and introduces it with the word “*therefore*” (vs.1). The word “*therefore*” indicates that as the author gives this exhortation, it is rooted in what was said in the previous context. In this case, the author was saying that in light of the grandeur of the role that Jesus possesses as the Messianic Son of God, there are certain implications for those who wish to make sure that they have a secure relationship with God. Specifically, one “*must give more earnest heed to the things we have heard*” (vs.1). The Greek word translated as “*must*” refers to something that is a logical necessity, based on some premise (in this case the exalted position of the Son). The necessity that lay before these believers was to “*give more earnest heed*”. To “*give heed*” refers to being attentive, giving focused attention to something, or hearing something with the intent of acting upon what one has heard. This verb is modified by an adverb that is translated as “*more earnest*”; which refers to one action that is far in excess of another; thus indicating a comparison is being made. In this case, the author was not saying that the readers needed to give a lot more attention than they had in the past; instead, as the context will reveal, they were to give more focused attention to what Christ had said, than to what angels had said to their ancestors before them. This focused attention was to be directed toward “*things we have heard*”. Based upon the flow of thought in this letter, it is clear that the author is referring to the content of the Gospel as it was first delivered by Jesus Christ.

The author's exhortation continues with the words “*lest we drift away*” (vs.1b). This is a negative purpose clause; meaning that one is to give earnest heed in order to make sure that one does not drift away. The Greek word translated as “*drift away*” was used with a variety of nuances. It was used to refer to an oversized ring slipping off a person's finger, and to a boat slowly drifting off course. Perhaps the most helpful use to clarify its meaning here is the idea of a thought drifting from one's mind so that it is forgotten. The word is describing slowly moving away from something because some sort of invisible force or current is at work creating that distance. The imagery conveys the thought that if one does not give focused attention to the things of the Gospel, the result will inevitably be the slow but sure

deterioration of its influence upon one's life. This is a principle we see illustrated in all areas of life; whether a musician, an artist, an athlete, or a craftsman, the reality is that if we cease to pursue growth, we immediately and continuously experience a diminishing of our skills, knowledge, and abilities. Therefore in our spiritual lives, we either grow because we focus on spiritual development or our orientation to the things of God gets less and less due to inattention.

Then the author turns to explain his reasoning more fully (indicated by the author's use of the conjunction "*for*" to begin the next sentence). The nature of the author's argument in the next two verses is known in logic as an *a fortiori* argument (meaning an argument from the lesser to the greater). An example of this sort of reasoning would be; if you find the strategy of checkers too complicated, you won't be able to master the game of chess. It is taking an accepted truism from a lesser situation or incident and applying it to another situation where the principle is even more true. In making this argument, the author wrote "*for if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...*" (vs.2-3a). The next question is, what is this "*word*" that the author refers to which came through the angels? The answer is, the Mosaic Law. In Exodus there is no reference to the involvement of the angels in the giving of the Law. However in later portions of Scripture referring back to when it was given, we are told by various authors that in fact angels did play a mediating role in the giving of the Law (Deut.33:2; Ps.68:17; Acts 7:53; Gal.3:19).

The author continues and says that the law "*proved steadfast*". This expression means it was demonstrated to be certain or reliable. The author says that the word spoken through angels was demonstrated to be reliable because "*every transgression and disobedience received a just reward*". The background to this and many other allusions to OT history in this epistle relates specifically to the wilderness generation of Israel. In the narratives that tell the story of the wilderness wanderings we read repeatedly that the sins of the Israelites received swift and dramatic punishments (Lev.10; Num.12; 16). According to the author of this letter these punishments (i.e. "*rewards*", which refers to one receiving what one has earned or deserved) demonstrated that God's Law spoken through the angels was certain, in the sense that whatever it said, including its warnings, definitely came to pass.

It is helpful to note that the accumulation of forensic language ("*proved steadfast*", "*every transgression and disobedience*", & "*received a just reward*") further confirms that the message declared through the angels signifies the Law delivered at Sinai.

Therefore, the lesser, though profoundly serious truism, is that the law (given through angels) was enforced by God through powerful judgments that were brought against those who took its teachings lightly. Thus, the reasoning continues, "*how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation*"? The Greek word translated as "*neglect*" means the exact opposite of giving heed. By the way it is formed, the question is rhetorical, meaning that it is not asked in order to gain

information, but to make a declarative point; in this case, there is no possibility of escape similar judgment if one fails to give heed to the revelation given through Christ. Therefore, the greater situation to which the truism is applied is the seriousness of showing a lack of attentiveness to the Gospel and allowing oneself to drift away; pointing out that one must anticipate that if those under the Old Covenant could not escape judgment for sinning against it, then those who sin against God by turning away from the Gospel of Christ, and the great salvation that is provided through that Gospel, will also not escape judgment, but rather can be certain they will be punished.

II. Reasons to Believe: (vs.3b-4)

As the author continues, the focus is upon the evidence for the reliability of the truthfulness of the Gospel. First, it was uttered by the mouth of God's Son (vs.3b). As the passage states, the Gospel has its origin in the teachings of Christ Himself. Beyond that it was "*confirmed*" (i.e. demonstrated to be certain) to both the author of the letter and to its recipients by those who heard Christ (the apostles). It is this reference, where the author includes himself as one who had not heard the Gospel directly from Christ that clearly demonstrates that Paul did not write this letter. For in his letters, Paul made it clear that he did in fact receive his Gospel directly from Christ and not from the twelve apostles (Gal.1:12; I Cor.9:1).

The author then adds "*God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will*". The original Greek verb translated as "*God also bearing witness*", would be better translated as "*God bearing witness with them*". The idea is not that God provided an independent witness, but that His witness was joined with that of the Apostles. That witness is described as coming in the form of "*signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit*". The word "*signs*" refers to those things that validate or demonstrate the significance of a prophetic word; the word "*wonders*" refers to those things that inspire awe and amazement; and the word "*miracles*" refers to demonstrations of God's power. These three words do not describe three different categories of supernatural events; rather these words provide a three-fold description of all the supernatural works of God that He did through the Apostles. God did these miraculous things in the plain view of the populace through the apostles (things similar to what Jesus Himself had done) in order to demonstrate that these men spoke on behalf of God Himself.

The last way in which God bore witness is poorly translated here. The NKJV renders the phrase "*and gifts of the Holy Spirit*". However, no Greek word for gifts is employed here. Instead, a literal rendering of the Greek would be, "*and distribution of the Holy Spirit*" (kai pneumatos hagiou merismois). The meaning is that it is the Spirit Himself who is given out, shared, or distributed. This fits well with the idea of the validation of the testimony of the apostles; because the pouring out of God's Spirit upon all of God's people was one of the key signs of the Messianic or last age (Joel 2; Jeremiah 31). The last clause "*according to His own will*" refers to the fact that all these things happened in harmony with the Father's will.

Conclusion:

The author's point was that these Jewish believers needed to persevere in the faith, because if they did not keep their focus on the Gospel, but instead neglected it; they would not escape the punishment that comes upon those who disobey God. The certainty that such judgment would come was based upon the fact that God followed through with His warnings under the Old Covenant and punished temporal sin against the commandments given through the angelic host. Thus, it was that much more certain that eternal judgment would come upon those who disregarded both the revelation and salvation provided through Son of God. And the author reinforced the certainty of such a judgment by reminding these Christians why they believed in the first place. It was because God demonstrated the truthfulness of the Gospel before everyone by the miraculous things that God did through His spokesmen the apostles.

One last thing needs to be addressed. What is the nature of the judgment that the author warned about here? There are a number of Evangelical interpreters who argue that it must be physical death, because a believer cannot lose his or her salvation.

Though this is a popular point of view, it distorts what the author was actually writing about. First, if the judgment were only physical death, it wouldn't be much of a deterrent to turning away from the Gospel, because it was fear of torture and physical death that was causing these Jewish Christians to consider abandoning the faith in the first place. Essentially then, the author's argument would have been that they would die anyway if they left the faith, so why not persevere. More importantly, the language in the other warnings in this letter (chs.6, 10, 12) strongly imply eternal judgment. This would indicate that the same was intended here. But the idea is not that any genuine Christian would lose their salvation, rather the author was arguing that those who fail to persevere in their faith demonstrate they were never truly saved. This echoes the warning of Christ Himself when He said that anyone who wishes to save his or her physical life would lose their soul (Matt.6:24-26), which refers to the totality of the person. The point then is that true saving faith is one that lasts throughout one's life, not a faith that turns to Christ for a season and then turns away forever.