

IV. A Great Salvation

October 31/November 1/2, 2017 Hebrews 2:1-4

Aim: To pay much closer attention to the revealed Word of God so that we may not drift away.

Schreiner: The reason for the elegant theological argument in 1:1-14 now surfaces. The author warns the readers that they should not drift away from the message they received. The main point of this paragraph is the warning given to readers. Connections between this paragraph and chapter 1 surface; both emphasize that God has spoken through the Son, and thus the readers must heed what was proclaimed to them. Verses 2-4 explain why the warning is so crucial. In verses 2-3 we have an argument from the lesser to the greater. If those who violated the word given by angels were punished with earthly punishments, those who reject such a great salvation will experience even more dire consequences. When we put the pieces together, the main point of the paragraph can be summarized as follows: pay attention and don't drift away from the message proclaimed by the Son, for there is no escape for those who neglect such a great salvation. The paragraph concludes with an affirmation of the truth received. It was 'spoken by the Lord' and confirmed by eyewitnesses. Signs and wonders and other miracles attested to the truthfulness of the revelation. The readers should have no doubts about the veracity of the revelation and therefore must not turn away from the truth.

Bruce: The main reason why the Son's superiority to angels has been so emphasized now begins to appear. The older revelation, the law of Sinai, was communicated by angelic intermediaries, but God's final revelation was given in His Son and therefore demands correspondingly serious attention. The truth and the teaching of the gospel must not be held lightly; they are of supreme moment, they are matters of life and death, and must be cherished and obeyed at all costs. The danger of drifting away from them, and so losing them, cannot be treated too gravely.

Phillips: This is the first of five major warnings in Hebrews, all of which deal with the danger of falling away from faith in Christ and therefore from salvation. The Book of Hebrews is a sermon on the theme "Do not fall away." These Hebrew Christians were being persecuted by the Jewish community around them, and the apostolic writer urgently warns them not to renounce Jesus Christ under pressure.

A. The Message of Angels (2:1-2)

1. Warning Against Drifting Away (2:1)

¹*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*

MacArthur: The two key words in verse one are *prosechō* ('to give attention to') and *pararheō* ('to let slip'). With its modifier, *prosechō* is translated 'pay much closer attention to' and is emphatic. In other words, on the basis of who Christ is, we must give careful attention to what we have heard about Him. We cannot hear these things and let them just slide through our minds. The word *paraheō* translates here as 'drift away from' and can have several meanings. It can be used of something flowing or slipping past, as of a ring slipping off a finger. It can be used of something slipping down and getting caught in a difficult place. It is used of something which carelessly has been allowed to slip away. But both of these words also have nautical connotations. *Prosechō* means to moor a ship, to tie it up. *Paraheō* can be used of a ship that

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has been allowed to drift past the harbor because a sailor forgot to attend to the steerage or to properly chart the wind, tides, and current. With these meanings in mind, the verse could be translated, ‘Therefore, we must the more eagerly secure our lives to the things which we have been taught, lest the ship of life drift past the harbor of salvation and be lost forever.’ The illustration is both graphic and appropriate. Most people do not go headlong and intentionally into hell. They drift into it. Most people do not deliberately, in a moment, turn their backs on God or curse Him. Most people just slowly, almost imperceptibly slip past the harbor of salvation out to eternal destruction.

a) *Don’t Drift Away*

Schreiner: The readers are exhorted, in this first warning passage, to continue to pay attention to the gospel proclaimed to them so they don’t drift away. The word translated ‘drift away’ (*παραρυόμεν, pararuōmen*) is used to describe ‘a ring slipping off a finger.’ Perhaps there is a nautical metaphor here so that we picture a ship not anchored slowly drifting out to sea. The word ‘therefore’ (*Δια τουτο, Dia touto*) links 2:1-4 with the preceding argument. The logic is as follows: since Jesus as the divine Son and Davidic king is greater than the angels and since He has cleansed the readers of their sins, they must stand by what they have heard.

Bruce: ERV/ARV ‘Lest haply we drift away from them’ contemplates Christians as in peril of being carried downstream past a fixed landing place and so failing to gain its security. AK/KJV ‘Lest at any time we should let them slip’ reflects another use of the same verb, of allowing a ring to slip off the finger and so losing it. Whatever be the precise metaphorical force of the verb here, our author is warning Christian readers, who have heard and accepted the gospel, that if they yield to the temptation to abandon their profession their plight is hopeless.

Phillips: The author focuses on the danger of ‘drifting away’ from the message they had heard. The Greek word here is a nautical term, *pararreō*, describing a ship at sail that has drifted off course, or a ship in harbor that has slipped its moorings. In other contexts it is used to describe something that slips from our minds, or even a ring that slips off a finger. One of the key ideas here is that this drifting away is something that happens largely unnoticed. While it is happening the changes are imperceptible; only later do its consequences become clear. This is a grave danger, against which we must respond with careful attention.

Hughes: So now, with the superiority of Christ ringing in their ears, the writer explicitly sounds his warning to the harried church in 2:1-4, beginning with the words: ‘Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.’ The vivid warning here uses nautical, sailing language, suggesting the image of a ship whose anchor has broken loose from the ocean floor and is dangerously drifting away. Such dangerous drifting is not intentional but comes rather from inattention and carelessness—which was precisely the problem with the pressured little church. They had become careless about their moorings in Christ. At first, in calm waters, that was not noticeable. But as the storms of opposition rose, some of them were drifting farther and farther away from Christ toward the shoals of shipwreck in their old world of Judaism.

Hughes: That church’s experience two thousand years ago intersects our lives in this way: *drifting is the besetting sin of our day.* And as the metaphor suggests, it is not so much intentional as from unconcern. Christians neglect their anchor—Christ—and begin to quietly drift away. There is no friction, no dramatic sense of departure. But when the winds of trouble come, the things of Christ are left far behind, even out of sight.

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(1) Apostasy

Schreiner: What they heard, of course, was the message about Jesus Christ, particularly the efficacy of His sacrifice for sins. They heard the final and definitive word that God had spoken by His Son (1:2). They faced the danger of ceasing to pay heed to this authoritative word and slipping away from the truth. The remainder of the letter, especially the remaining warning passages, clarifies that the drifting away described here is not a temporary defection from the truth. Drifting away is another way of describing apostasy, the denial and rejection of the gospel.

Phillips: Do you realize that if you do not pay attention to your spiritual condition it will deteriorate on its own? Do you realize, given the corrupt nature of this world and of your heart, that you naturally become dull and then deadened spiritually, steadily believing the lies of this evil age? Without giving heed to the spiritual resources God provides, your heart will revert to greed, pride, avarice, sensuality, and malice—all those characteristics that define our natural state in sin and lead to destruction.

Phillips: The Book of Hebrews is notable for confronting us with the reality of apostasy. To be sure, the Bible teaches the eternal security of all true believers in Jesus Christ (e.g., Jn. 10:28). Yet, it is also true that not all who give a profession of faith are true believers. Judas Iscariot is one infamous example. Another excellent example is Paul's one-time companion Demas. At the end of Colossians and Philemon, Paul adds his name to the list of his close companions. But in 2 Timothy we read these sober words: 'Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me' (2 Tim. 4:10).

(2) Perseverance

Phillips: We are secure through faith in Jesus Christ. But like a good tree, true faith is revealed by its fruit (Mt. 7:17-19). Therefore Peter tells us to 'be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure' (2 Pe. 1:10). 'Examine yourselves,' Paul adds, 'to see whether you are in the faith' (2 Cor. 13:5). We must therefore persevere and use the resources God gives us to bear fruit and thus not to drift away.

b) Pay Closer Attention

Phillips: Mindful of the danger of apostasy, the author of Hebrews gives the accompanying command: 'Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.' 'What we have heard' is the message of salvation in God's Son, as the preceding chapter declared. The Greek word for 'pay attention,' *prosechō*, is another term with nautical implications; it was used to denote holding to a course or securing an anchor. There is a danger, the writer argues, and there is also a remedy. To avoid drifting off course you hold the wheel of the ship in line; to avoid slipping out with the current you make fast the anchor. Drifting away happens on its own without much effort on our part, but staying on course is quite the opposite. It requires constant diligence! When it comes to the past tense of our salvation—to what is already finished and secure, namely, our justification through faith in Christ—there is no place for our works. We receive forgiveness of our sins not by our work but by Christ's work. But when it comes to the present tense of our salvation—that which is worked out progressively, namely, our sanctification—this is extremely active.

Phillips: The particular means of security and sanctification the writer of Hebrews wants us to concentrate on is the gospel message, or, to put it more generally, God's saving revelation

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culminating in Christ. To use the metaphor of verse 1, God’s Word is the anchor that secures our salvation, and it is the rudder by which we safely steer the ship of our souls. This is a principle we vitally need today. People are looking for power from God to change their lives and assure them of salvation. Yet many Christians seem intent on using every method except the one highlighted for us all through the Bible, including this very passage: diligent study and understanding of the Word of God. Many people seek to come close to God through some intense emotional experience. Others follow disciplines, rituals, or special formulas that are guaranteed to make them more godly or secure. But look at the emphasis of the writer to Hebrews: ‘We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard,’ that is, to the Word of God.

Phillips: We must remember and organize our thoughts around the Bible’s message every day of our lives. We need to remember humanity’s fall in sin and the corruption that remains within us. We need to recall what the bible teaches about God’s character—His faithfulness and power, His wisdom and love. We need to be told about His holiness and what an offense our sin is to Him. Then we must look to the cross and see God’s mercy so wondrously displayed, remembering that we have been purchased as new and holy people, never more to dwell in sin. We need daily to ground our identity (1) in God’s adoption of us as His own beloved children, (2) in Christ’s blood that was shed to purchase us from sin, and (3) in our destiny as co-heirs with Him and as saints called to glory, but also as pilgrims sojourning through an alien and dying world. In sum, we need to ‘pay closer attention’ to the message of God’s Word. It is like a firm anchor to hold us fast in salvation, like a compass to guide us safely.

2. Reliability of the Old Testament (2:2)

Phillips: Hebrews 2:1 is the key verse in this passage, supply both a warning and a command. Verses 2-4 provide support, making clear why this exhortation should be taken so seriously. In these verses we see both a negative and a positive commendation of the New Testament message in Christ.

Hughes: Careful attention to what we have heard is the divinely prescribed antidote to drifting. And the writer wants to drive this point home in an even more forceful way to his wandering friends. So he uses a Hebrew argument style called *qal wa homer* (literally, ‘light and heavy’), which employs the reasoning that if something is true in a light or lesser thing, it is true in a heavy or greater thing. He uses this argument style to frame the great question he wants to emphasize: ‘How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?’ (v. 3)—putting the *qal* argument before it and beginning the *homer* with it.

Schreiner: The author gives the reason (“for”, *γὰρ, gar*) in an ‘if-then’ construction why the readers should not defect from the word they heard. The message transmitted by angels was binding, and those who violated its stipulations were punished. The argument moves from the lesser to the greater, with the lesser reason given in verse 2 and the greater reason in verse 3. Verse 2 features the revelation transmitted by angels. The message given by angels was binding on its hearers so that those who violated its provisions were justly punished.

a) Declared by Angels (2:2a)

²*For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable...*

Hughes: The *qal*, the less heavy argument from the Law, is stated in verse 2 and then flows into the great question in verse 3. The writer states the common teaching of contemporary Judaism

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and of the New Testament that the angels *mediated* the giving of the Law (cp. Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19). In the midst of all the fire and lightning on Sinai, God the Father spoke through an honored angel who in turn dictated to Moses.

Bruce: The angelic mediation of the law is not recorded in the Old Testament. The nearest thing to it is the description of the Sinai theophany at the beginning of the Blessing of Moses (Dt. 33:2). In the Septuagint the last clause (‘with flaming fire at his right hand’) is rendered: ‘At his right hand were angels with him.’ This associates the angels more closely with the law-giving, but does not make them mediators. Their mediatorship finds clearer expression in the Intertestamental and early Christian age, and is mentioned as a matter of general knowledge in two other places in the New Testament (Gal. 3:19; Acts 7:53).

Schreiner: The message mediated by the angels was clearly the Mosaic law, a notion stated elsewhere in the NT (cp. Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). Apparently such a tradition was commonplace, though it is not clearly articulated in the OT (but cp. Dt. 33:2). We see from the link between angels and the Mosaic law why angels surface in chapter 1. The readers were not interested in angels because they were entranced by angels in some kind of mystical way or because of a polemic against angel Christology. Instead, the reference to angels fits with the letter as a whole. It accords with the readers’ desire to live under the old covenant, to find forgiveness in Levitical sacrifices. Hence the superiority of the Son to angels demonstrates that He is superior to the old covenant mediated by angels.

MacArthur: Why is Old Testament law, particularly the Ten Commandments, so connected with angels? Why does the writer emphasize that angels mediate the Old Covenant? He does so because the angels were instrumental in bringing the Ten Commandments, as is clear from several passages. At Sinai, where Moses was given the law, the Lord was accompanied by a host of angels (Ps. 68:17; cp. Dt. 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53). We believe this indicates that angels were involved in bringing the law.

Schreiner: There is no thought, however, that the word conveyed by angels was flawed. No, it was ‘reliable’ (*βεβαιος*, *bebaios*) and sure and hence ‘legally binding’ on the hearers. In light of the contrast between 1:1 and 1:2, we can say that the angelic word was partial and provisional. It was not the last and definitive word spoken through the Son. Nevertheless, it was still a reliable and sure word. Indeed, those who violated the covenant stipulations ‘received a just punishment.’ The punishment accorded with the nature of the crime, and this is a fundamental principle of the Torah.

b) Demonstrated by Retribution (2:2b)

...and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution...

Phillips: First there is negative support in verses 2-3a. This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. The old covenant had to be taken most seriously, even though—as we saw in Hebrews 1—it was spoken by angels and is subordinate to the new covenant. It was a valid and binding covenant, and ‘every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution.’ The Old Testament, as the first readers of Hebrews well knew, is rife with examples. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelled against Moses and were swallowed up into the earth (Num. 16:32). Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire (Lev. 10:2). And the whole generation of Israelites who did not trust the Lord were made to wander forty years in the wilderness and then to die. These are examples just from the exodus of those who disobeyed the old covenant and were severely punished.

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Hughes: The point is, these words, though mediated by angels, were ‘reliable’—so reliable that ‘every transgression’ and ‘disobedience’ (unwillingness to hear and obey) ‘received a just retribution.’ Sometimes the punishment came directly from Heaven as in one day twenty-three thousand died or on another occasion when many were killed by snakes (1 Cor. 10:5-10). At other times the just punishment came through legal processes. ‘Every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution.’ This was the *qal* (the light) argument.

MacArthur: Two words are used here for sin: ‘transgression’ (*parabasis*) and ‘disobedience’ (*parakoē*). Transgression means to step across the line, as a willful act. It is an overt sin of commission—of intentionally doing something we know to be wrong. Disobedience, however, carries the idea of imperfect hearing. Disobedience deliberately shuts its ears to the commands, warnings, and invitations of God. It is a sin of neglect, of omission—doing nothing when we should do something. One is active sin, the other is passive, but both are willful and both are serious.

Bruce: The sanctions which attended the law given at Sinai were severe and inescapable. Every commandment had the appropriate penalty prescribed for its infringement, and for those who deliberately and of set policy defied or disregarded the law of God there was no reprieve—for such behavior the death sentence was fixed in advance. Yet the law was not imparted by such august mediation as the gospel; the law was ‘the word spoke through angels.’

MacArthur: Both the Old and New Testaments tell us that angels were at Sinai and were instrumental in bringing the law. And if you broke that law, that law broke you. There was no out. The law was inviolable; punishment for breaking it was sure and certain. The law punished every sin. And that punishment was fair. Notice the word ‘just’ in verse 2. God is often accused of being unjust when His punishment seems to us to be out of proportion of the wrong committed. But God, by His very nature, cannot be unjust. Under the Old Covenant He punished severely those who were determined to live without Him and to defy Him. He removed them from among His people for the sake of those who were pure and holy and wanted to live for Him. His judgment on the people of Israel was severe because they knew better. Punishment is always related to light. The more light we have, the more severe our punishment (see Mt. 11:20-24). The principle is this: the more you know, the greater the punishment for not abiding by what you know.

B. The Message of Jesus (2:3-4)

Schreiner: The author now completes the if-then argument, the argument from the lesser to the greater. If the word spoken by angels was sure and those who violated it were punished, then those who neglect the greater revelation given through the Son will not escape. Indeed, the readers would be foolish to reject the word spoken by the Lord, for there is no doubt about its truthfulness since it is a word from heaven.

1. Warning Against Neglect (2:3a)

...³ *how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*

Hughes: If the word of the Law that was mediated by angels was so binding that every infraction was punished (the *qal* or ‘light’ argument), then how much more accountable are those who have the word of salvation direct from Christ’s lips, plus the confirmation of eyewitnesses, plus the

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testimony of miracles, signs, wonders, and gifts (the *homer* or ‘heavy’ argument). Thus the weighty question of our text, ‘How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?’

Bruce: But the great salvation proclaimed in the gospel was brought to earth by no angel, but by the Son of God Himself. To treat it lightly, therefore, must expose one to sanctions even more awful than those which safeguarded the law. Here we have the first of many warnings which recur throughout the epistle, which make it plain that our author was afraid that his readers, succumbing to more or less subtle pressures, might become liable to those sanctions—if not by an overt renunciation of the gospel, then possibly by detaching themselves increasingly from its public profession until it ceased to have any influence upon their lives. This is the first of several places in the epistle where an inference is drawn *a fortiori* from law to gospel (see 7:21ff; 9:14; 10:28ff.).

Schreiner: The readers will not ‘escape’ (*εκφευξομεθα, ekpheuxometha*) if they turn away from such a great salvation. The salvation is great because it represents God’s final word (1:2). Jesus’ sacrifice has accomplished cleansing of sin once for all (1:3; 7:1-10:18), and hence He now sits at God’s right hand (1:13; 8:1), triumphant and reigning over all. Those who repudiate such a salvation will face certain judgment. In the OT (2:2) the punishments were earthly; Israel suffered exile for its sin. But the revelation through the Son is heavenly (e.g., 12:25-27), so that those who reject Him will receive a more intense punishment, a final and eternal punishment from which there is no exit. The use of the word ‘escape’ places a frame around this warning passage and the last warning in 12:25-29, for in both cases the readers are warned that they will not ‘escape’ (2:3; 12:25).

Schreiner: The readers are admonished not to ‘neglect’ such a great salvation. The word ‘neglect’ (*αμελεω, ameleō*) in Mt. 22:5 is used to describe those who failed to attend the wedding banquet because they found their farm or business more interesting. The ‘neglect’ here is malignant, for they will face judgment for disregarding such a great salvation.

MacArthur: To whom is the warning directed? It cannot be to Christians. They can never be in danger of neglecting salvation—in the sense of not receiving it—since they already have it. They can neglect growth and discipleship, but they cannot neglect salvation. Nor can the warning be to those who have never heard the gospel, because they cannot neglect what they do not even know exists. The warning must therefore be directed to non-Christians, specifically Jews, who are intellectually convinced of the gospel but who fail to receive it for themselves. But if the warnings are to unbelievers, why does the writer speak of ‘we’ and ‘us’? 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. He seems simply to be saying, ‘All of us who have heard the gospel ought to accept it.’

Phillips: If all that is true of the old covenant, which is the lesser revelation and lesser salvation, the writer then asks, ‘How shall we escape if we neglect the greater salvation of the new covenant?’ These words should dispel the common notion that the new covenant, or the New Testament, is an easier law than the old covenant. ‘God tried being legalistic in the Old Testament,’ the argument goes, ‘but since that didn’t work, He changed His mind. In the New Testament He decided just to love us.’ First of all, this misunderstands the Old Testament, which presents not only a holy God but also a loving God to Israel. More importantly, it denies the point of our passage, which is that the stakes actually go up in the new covenant. There is a greater salvation, and the obligation to receive it in faith is more stringent.

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Phillips: If anything, Jesus' presentation of the law of Moses serves to bring its every nuance and spiritual demand into view. One after another, Jesus presents in the Sermon on the Mount the Old Testament laws in terms of their inner, higher, and spiritual demands (e.g., Mt. 5:21-22). So did Jesus lower the demands of the law? According to Him, 'I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them' (Mt. 5:17). On the night of His arrest, Jesus said, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another' (Jn. 13:34). People sometimes assume this means that God is willing to settle for less in the new covenant than in the old. Back in the Old Testament, they say, people wearied themselves obeying all kinds of rules and regulations. In the easier new covenant, all you have to do is love. That's it. Just love. But of course, the command to love is vastly more difficult than the outward demands of the Old Testament law. It is easy to wash your hands. But washing your heart of anger, malice, and self-interest is another matter altogether. Therefore, the law's condemnation—always intended to drive sinners to God's grace in the gospel—is more intense in the light of Christ's coming. Therefore it is most urgent for us to attend to and receive and hold fast the revelation that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

2. Reliability of the New Testament (2:3b-4)

Phillips: In the second half of verse 3 and then in verse 4, the revelation in Christ is positively commended.

Hughes: The heavy (*homer*) argument—'how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?'—gets its weight from three successive clauses in verses 3 and 4.

Schreiner: The remainder of verses 3-4 unpack why it is utter folly to neglect the salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ.

a) Declared by Jesus (2:3b)

It was declared at first by the Lord...

Schreiner: First of all, it is an authoritative word, for 'it was first spoken by the Lord.' The 'Lord' here refers to Jesus Himself; He is the Son by whom God has spoken His final word (1:2). The Creator and Sustainer of the world, the heir of all things, has Himself entered history and spoken to human beings through word and deed. Jesus Christ has revealed finally and definitively who God is to human beings.

Bruce: The great salvation of which the gospel speaks as, to begin with, 'announced through the Lord.' 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.

Hughes: First, it is identified as 'a great salvation...declared at first by the Lord.' Jesus proclaimed it! The angels mediated the Law, but Jesus was more than a mediator of the gospel. He was the divine Son, but He was also the incarnate Son, which makes His communication infinitely superior to that of the angels.

Phillips: The gospel has come to us from the Lord Himself. This is a message that has come through God's own Son, who came from heaven to earth to be our Savior. This is what we saw in the opening verses of this letter (1:1-2). This message demands our attention because it was declared by the Lord Himself. It declares a salvation that He gives as a free gift to all who believe. What a contrast there is between this gospel and every supposed gospel offered by this world! In every religion of man, people have to feed the god they serve. But Christ Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall

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never thirst’ (Jn. 6:35). In every human message of salvation, you carry the burden on your shoulders, and the false gods you serve weigh down upon your back. But in His gospel God says: ‘I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you (Is. 46:4).

b) Delivered to Witnesses (2:3c)

...and it was attested to us by those who heard...

Schreiner: Second, not only was the word spoken personally by the Lord Himself in history, this word was also ‘confirmed’ to the readers by eyewitnesses who heard and saw Jesus. If believers are going to stake their lives on the gospel, they need to be assured of its truthfulness and reliability. The word spoken through angels was ‘legally binding’ (*βεβαιος, bebaios*), and the word spoken by Jesus was ‘confirmed’ (*εβεβαιωθη, ebebaiōthē*). The author and readers, though they were not ear-and eyewitnesses, can be sure of the message spoken through the Lord because it was corroborated by those who heard Jesus. We see from this verse that the early church was concerned about the reliable transmission of what Jesus said and did. They did not look kindly upon those who freely invented the words and works of Jesus Christ.

Hughes: Next the text says that the salvation ‘was attested to us by those who heard.’ This primarily refers to the apostles attesting what Jesus said and passing it along from faith to faith through the succeeding generations.

Bruce: Neither our author, nor his readers had heard the liberating message directly from the lips of the Lord, but depended on the sure testimony of those who had listened to him. Our author, unlike Paul, does not claim any direct revelation from Christ for himself or assert his independence of the apostles; in this respect he puts himself on the same level as his fellow-Christians who heard the gospel from those ‘who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word’ (Lk. 1:2).

Schreiner: In addition, this verse functions as strong evidence against Pauline authorship. Even though he wasn’t an eyewitness, he nowhere describes himself as dependent on others for the gospel he proclaimed. He emphasizes instead that Jesus called him to be an apostle on the Damascus Road and that his knowledge of the gospel was no dependent on the other apostles (Gal. 1:11-17).

c) Demonstrated by Spiritual Gifts (2:4)

...⁴while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Bruce: The witness of their informants, however, was confirmed by the signs and wonders and mighty works which attended their proclamation of the message; these were tokens granted by God to attest the truth of what was proclaimed. The testimony of the New Testament writings to the regularity with which these phenomena accompanied the preaching and receiving of the gospel in the early apostolic age is impressive in its range (cp. Acts 2:22; 2:43; Gal. 3:5; 1 Pe. 1:12).

Schreiner: Third, God also bore witness to the truth of the revelation by miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The author emphasizes that God has added His own witness (*συνεπιμαρτυρουντος, synepimartyrountos*) to the truth of the gospel. The truth was verified ‘by signs and wonders, various miracles.’ The miracles given accredited the revelation, demonstrating that it was genuinely given by God. Jesus’ miracles authenticated His ministry according to the Gospels, and they were also signs of the presence of the kingdom. The three words used to denote

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miracles are roughly synonymous, though the term ‘signs’ (*σημειοις, sēmeiois*) suggests that human beings should discern the significance of the miracles. The word ‘wonders’ (*τερασιν, terasin*) communicates the unprecedented and astonishing nature of God’s work, while ‘miracles’ (*δυναμεισιν, dynamesin*) features the power of God. God also granted signs and wonders to the apostles, demonstrating that they were truly His messengers (Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 14:3; 15:12). Paul emphasizes the validity of his apostleship by appealing to the ‘signs and wonders’ in his ministry (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12). SO too, the readers in Hebrews can be assured that the salvation they initially trusted is true. The miracles and signs and wonders demonstrated that God has put His imprimatur, His seal of approval, upon the message the Hebrews received initially.

Schreiner: Also verifying the truth of the gospel is ‘the distribution of gifts from the Holy Spirit.’ The word ‘apportionments’ (*μερισμοις, merismois*) probably refers to the gifts of the Spirit. Elsewhere, both Paul (Gal. 3:1-5) and Peter (Acts 15:7-11) claim that the gift of the Holy Spirit demonstrates that Gentile believers truly belong to the people of God.

Hughes: Lastly, ‘God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.’ The testimony was dynamic. ‘Signs’ pointed beyond themselves to the mighty hand of God. ‘Wonders’ brought awe and amazement to those who saw. ‘Miracles’ (literally ‘powers’) showed the power of God beyond human ability. And ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit’ were given according to God’s will. These four things bore weighty testimony to the authenticity of the word of Christ and the confirming word of those who heard Him. The *homer* argument was heavy indeed.

Phillips: Furthermore, the writer adds, we know this message really is of the Lord because it was attested to in the ministry of the apostles by ‘signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.’ One of the greatest wonders that attests to the divine origin of His gospel is the very fact of the apostles’ witness. These were men who knew for sure whether or not the gospel was true. Peter and John, for instance, were at the open tomb on the morning of the resurrection (see Jn. 20:4-9). They knew whether or not Jesus really was raised. This means that they would have been aware if their message was false. What did they gain from preaching the gospel? The answer is nothing more than a life of persecution, poverty, and trial, with the likelihood of martyrdom staring them in the face the whole tome. The wonder of the apostles’ faith is a definite proof of the divine origin of the Christian message. Other signs and wonders and miracles and spiritual gifts fill the Book of Acts, and through them God gave His confirmation to the apostolic teaching. It is a message like no other, given by the Lord Jesus Christ, and witnessed to by the Holy Spirit.

Phillips: Because of what God did in the apostolic age, we do not need signs and wonders today to prove the gospel. The writer of Hebrews speaks of this attestation in the past, not the present tense: ‘God bore witness’ by these signs and wonders. We have already been given all the proof we need to believe the gospel, namely, that it was given by the Lord Himself and fully attested in the ministry of the apostles.

C. The Message to Us

Schreiner: The NT nowhere teaches that an initial acceptance of the saving message is sufficient without perseverance in faith. We must not drift from the faith or neglect our great salvation. If the people of God in the OT received earthly punishments for transgressing the Mosaic law

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mediated by angels, then those who repudiate the heavenly revelation given by the Son will not escape final judgment. Nor can we say that the revelation spoken by the Son is uncertain, for the Lord Himself came to earth to speak that word. And it was then confirmed by those who heard the Lord in history. Finally, God attested to the truth of the revelation through miracles, signs, and wonders and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Apostasy, then, would constitute a rejection of a clear word from God. No one can make the excuse that the revelation was not sufficiently certified so that doubts were permissible. Koester rightly remarks, ‘Warnings are not designed to rob people of hope, but to steer them away from danger in order to preserve them so that they might persevere and inherit what has been promised.’

Hughes: Here the application intersects our lives again, because the writer is not concerned here about those who have never heard. The transcending concern of this warning text is for those who *have* heard. Even more, the concern is not for those who reject the gospel, but for those who ‘neglect’ it. The concern is for one’s *attitude*—the one who has let the greatness of Christ slip away—the one who no longer marvels at the atonement—the one who no longer has a desire for the Word—the one who really does not pray in his spirit—the one who is drifting back to where he came from and has little concern about his drifting. To such the writer says there is no escape from the terrible consequences.

Hughes: What to do? The answer brings us full circle in the warning to where it begins: ‘Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.’ The force of the original is even stronger: we must pay the ‘*greatest attention*’ to what we have heard. Two things are in view here. First, all our attention must be focused on the supremacy of Christ: *prophetic, cosmic, Levitical, and angelic*. We need to work at this—turning from Christological passage to passage, meditating on Him, asking questions, memorizing, and worshiping. Second, paying closest attention to what we have heard means living in the revelation of God’s Word—and it always has.

Phillips: ‘We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard,’ the writer of Hebrews exhorts, ‘lest we drift away from it.’ These words are as relevant today as when first written. We should fear to be separated from the anchor of God’s Word, or to have any other hand on the wheel of our lives than the Captain of our salvation, who speaks in the Bible. To drift away is ultimately to invite the judgment God will inflict on those who neglect His saving message in Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews says God attested to the gospel in the apostolic age by signs and wonders and miracles. We are not to go seeking after signs and wonders, but there is a miracle that happens today in the lives of those who hold fast to the message of God’s Word. It is the miracle of a changed life—a changed mind and a changed heart, changed attitudes and changed behaviors—changed into the likeness of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. This is the wonder by which God commends His Word to the world today—Christian people enlightened in truth, purified in holiness, settled in peace, and energized in love. This is the life eternal that begins today in the lives of those who believe. As God does this in you, through His Word, He will use the miracle of your life to commend His message in Christ to others.

For next time: Read Hebrews 2:5-9.