

Attention vs. Neglect

Hebrews 2:1-4

In 1997 the Antique Road Show was doing an appraisal in Atlanta. A man brought in a letter that Abraham Lincoln had written to his great grandfather in 1841 (photo). This man had passed it down to his 18-year-old grandson. Lincoln had written to this man to influence him how to vote in a state election in Illinois. Lincoln was mortified that his friend was thinking about voting for a certain candidate, and so he tried to persuade him to vote differently. Whereas Lincoln was normally very calm and cool, this letter was emotional and fiery. Because of the content and the condition of the letter, they should insure it for \$75,000 to \$125,000.

The appraiser made a special point of saying that this 18-year-old boy should keep this letter in a safety deposit box. I think she was probably concerned that this young man might not appreciate the value of the letter and might keep it on his desk in his dorm room and spill Mountain Dew on it or accidentally throw it away. The principle is that the more valuable an object, the more you should cherish and take care of it.

This is the basic logic of the first four verses of Hebrews 2. The author is going to argue that since our salvation is so valuable, we shouldn't neglect it or drift away from it; we should pay very close attention to our salvation and to the gospel that announced it.

An appeal to “pay close attention” to the gospel. (v. 1)

A brief recap of last week's message will help us see this point. In 1:1-4 in which the author of Hebrews demonstrated that God spoke decisively and fully in His Son. Jesus taking on flesh and blood and dwelling among us was the most comprehensive way that God could have spoken to us. In verse 4 he asserted that the Son was superior to the angels, having “inherited a more excellent name than they.” In verses 5-14 the author quotes six passages from the OT to prove his point. For example, let's read verses 13 and 14:

13 But to which of the angels has He ever said,
“Sit at My right hand,
Until I make Your enemies
A footstool for Your feet”?

14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

In verse 13 the author quotes from Psalm 110 (the OT text quoted more frequently than any other in the NT). His point is that God never said to the angels, “Sit at My right hand”; God never invited them to be enthroned there. No, that place of honor is reserved for the Son. Rather, the angels are “ministering spirits” who are deployed on behalf of those who will inherit salvation. Angels have always had a strategic role to play in God's plans, but their authority and status and power doesn't begin to compare to that of the Son.

Why is all of this important? It's important because of the exalted status of angels in the first century. Jews in the first century rightly understood that in the hierarchy of created beings, angels had a higher status than them (humanity is "a little lower than the angels" - 2:9). They understood that if God spoke a word through angels, that word was authoritative. If Jesus is superior to the angels and if God has spoken to us through Him, **His word** is equally authoritative and supersedes that which was spoken through angels. And so we read in verse 1:

1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *from it*.

Remember that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians. They had grown up in Judaism but had come to believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah. They would have been raised with the conviction that you should pay attention to everything found in the Law. They never would have thought, "You know, I don't think we're going to celebrate the Passover this year." Nothing in the Law was optional; therefore they paid careful attention to the word of God given in the old covenant. The argument here is that since Jesus is superior to the angels, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard **from Him** - namely, the gospel.

We need to pay close attention to the gospel "so that we do not drift away from it." The term "drift away" was used in nautical contexts of a boat that gradually drifted off course. If those onboard didn't pay close attention to a fixed point in the distance they could imperceptibly drift off course and become hopelessly lost. Spiritually speaking, if we don't pay close attention to the gospel, we can gradually and imperceptibly drift away from it.

I don't know anybody who used to be passionate about Jesus but is now luke-warm who woke up one morning and decided, "I think I'll systematically neglect my salvation so that I'm eventually lukewarm. . ." That change in spiritual temperature typically happens imperceptibly over time. It happens gradually without even trying. When a person quits fixing his/her eyes on Jesus and becomes preoccupied with other things (even good things), this drift is the most common outcome.

If I'm describing you, the first thing I'd encourage you to do is to admit it to God so that you can get back on course. We often sing the song *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* which contains the line, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it." That line is a confession in which we admit to God that we easily wander off course and wander away from our devotion to Him. Sometimes we "feel it," don't we? If you recognize that you're drifting, it's not too late. Just admit it and turn back to your devotion to Jesus.

The book of Hebrews will advocate "paying attention" to the gospel and fixing our eyes on Jesus through some very specific, tangible practices. For example, in Hebrews 10:23-25 the author highlights the importance of gathering together - regularly spending time with other believers for mutual encouragement.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

We'll talk about this in depth when we get to this passage in a couple months, but the perspective here is that it's a dangerous thing when someone quits meeting with other believers. The goal of the Christian life isn't to become so strong and self-sufficient that you don't need other believers anymore. Rather, a mature Christian is someone who has concluded, "I am prone to wander and drift away from my devotion to Jesus, so I will build into my life regular interaction with other believers who can encourage me and help me pay attention to the gospel and how I should live." Stated more directly, you need people who are thinking about your life, plotting and scheming ways to encourage you to persevere. And you need to have that same intentional mindset toward at least a few others.

Here at Faith this gathering together happens in a variety of ways. Gatherings for worship (such as this one) provide a regular time to meet with other believers. Larger worship gatherings aren't particularly conducive for developing in-depth relationships. But they are good for "teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16). One thing that happens when we sing is that we remind each other of what is really true (as opposed to what we feel or even how we're living). As well, we (obviously) teach the Word in corporate worship. Through sermons we are all encouraged by the same truth.

Life groups also provide regular opportunities to gather with others for mutual encouragement. This will probably be the primary place in the church where you are known and where you know others. When a life group works well, its members live out Hebrews 10:24-25: they think about one another and they say and do things that stimulate one another to love and good deeds. When you join a life group you are saying, "I am committing myself to gathering with others whether I feel like it or not. I need encouragement, and I need to encourage others."

There are also ways that we pay attention to the gospel and fix our eyes on Jesus individually. Personal Bible study, meditation on Scripture, reading good books, and speaking the truth in love each have their place. Consider whether or not you are intentionally putting yourself in a position to pay close attention to the gospel and the teachings of Scripture in general. That's the positive appeal: Pay close attention to the gospel.

In verses 2 through 4 we find a complementary warning:

A warning against neglecting "so great a salvation." (Hebrews 2:2-4)

If you read the book of Hebrews straight through, you'll notice that the author toggles back and forth between encouragement and warning. Here we find the first of several warnings. These verses explain why it's appropriate to pay "much closer attention" to the word of God under the new covenant than under the old covenant.

The logic we see here will challenge some commonly-held perspectives about following Christ under the new covenant. Specifically, there is a tendency to view God as being serious and demanding under the old covenant but light-hearted and lenient under the new covenant. This is understandable because under the old covenant there were very specific regulations that stipulated, “If you commit **this** sin, **here’s** the punishment.” For example, Leviticus 24 records how a young man “blasphemed the Name [of God]” (he cursed God). His punishment? They took him outside the camp; everybody who had heard him curse God laid hands on him; then they stoned him to death.

We **rightly** say that under the new covenant those who put their faith in Christ don’t have to bear such punishment; the punishment that we deserve (for cursing God, for lying, for anger and cheating and lust) fell on Jesus Himself. He absorbed the punishment for our sin on the cross. But we would be **wrong** to conclude that God really cared about obedience and devotion under the old covenant, but that God doesn’t care whether or not we love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength under the new covenant. It is wrong to think that since Jesus completely paid for our sin, it doesn’t matter how we actually behave. Our behavior - how we live our lives - confirms that we’ve experienced salvation and that we’re really children of God (family resemblance).

These verses will argue that the because our salvation in the new covenant is superior to that under the old covenant, the consequence of neglecting that salvation are greater. Here’s what we read in verse 2 and the first half of verse 3:

2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, 3 how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

The “word spoken through angels” was the Law. The OT doesn’t explicitly state that angels spoke the Law to Moses (see Exodus 20:1), although the idea isn’t foreign to the OT (see Deut. 33:2). By the time the NT was written, it was an accepted doctrine that angels had spoken the Law to Moses. For example, Paul wrote in Galatians 3:19 that the Law “was ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator.”

Here the author makes a couple of statements about the Law that everyone would have accepted. First, “the words spoken through angels proved unalterable”: it was legally binding; it couldn’t be set aside just because you didn’t like it or because you felt like giving somebody a break. Second, “every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty”: God prescribed an appropriate/just punishment for every violation of the Law. When a sin was committed in ignorance the punishment was lenient (Numbers 15:27); when a sin was committed with “eyes wide open” [defiantly] the punishment was more severe (Numbers 15:30). Those who received this letter would have agreed that the word spoken through angels stipulated binding, appropriate penalties for disobedience.

That being the case, the author writes, “how will **we** escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” Since nobody escaped the appropriate penalties when they neglected what God had spoken through angels, how will we escape if we neglect what God has spoken through His one and only Son? The punishment isn’t specifically stated here, but the implication is that we won’t escape God’s judgment. I don’t think he’s talking about God punishing individual sins; I think he’s talking in ultimate terms. As I mentioned last week, the author is ultimately concerned about drifting away from Christ to the point of denying Him altogether. I think he’s saying that if you neglect salvation to the point of denying Christ altogether, you can expect a greater punishment. In the old covenant punishment was typically physical and immediate; under the new covenant punishment is spiritual and eternal.

I realize that this raises all sorts of questions about whether a genuine believe can really drift to the place of unbelief. People differ on that specific question. But (as far as I can tell) people from every theological persuasion believe that only those who persevere to the end will be saved. If a person says, “I no longer believe that Jesus’ death on the cross paid for my sin,” that person has no assurance of salvation regardless of what they’ve said they believed in the past.

Wanting to arrest this drift toward unbelief as early in the process as possible, the author warns against neglecting so great a salvation. To neglect is the opposite of “paying much closer attention” to what we’ve heard. Neglect is especially tragic in light of the overwhelming confirmation they had received for the validity of this salvation:

3 After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4 God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

Notice in verse 3 that the author places himself and his readers in the category of those who had heard about this salvation from others who had heard it (either from Jesus Himself or from other believers). This is one of the key verses that suggests that the Apostle Paul wasn’t the author of Hebrews because he was insistent that he had heard the gospel directly from Jesus (see Galatians 1:12). There are plenty of theories about who wrote Hebrews, but we aren’t told. But verse 3 describes the way the message of salvation has spread from the beginning: Jesus (the Lord) proclaimed salvation through His words, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection; those who heard this salvation told others who told others.

In verse 4 the author says the message of salvation was further confirmed to them through tangible manifestations of the power of God. They (the author and the Hebrews) had experienced “signs and wonders” and “various miracles.” The term “signs and wonders” was first used of the miracles surrounding the exodus when God delivered the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 7:3, Deut. 4:34, etc.). In the NT, Jesus performed signs and wonders to confirm His message of salvation. When Jesus healed someone or multiplied the bread and fish or calmed a storm He was not only meeting needs; He was also giving people tangible confirmation that He was the

Son of God and that His offer of salvation was real. Signs and wonders also accompanied the apostles as they told people about Jesus (see Acts 2:43, 5:12, etc.).

Here we read (verse 4) that God also testified to the Hebrews through these same types of signs and wonders and various miracles. There was continuity between what God had done in the exodus, in the life and ministry of Jesus and through the apostles. The message they had heard wasn't just words; it was the power of God for salvation.

As well, they received "gifts of the Holy Spirit." Whereas miracles happen at a point in time, spiritual gifts are ongoing evidence of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. God distributes gifts for the common good to all who believe. These gifts are an abiding confirmation that salvation is real.

Remember that the author of Hebrews is building a case for the greatness and superiority of salvation through Jesus Christ. If you neglect to the point of rejecting this salvation, how can you expect to escape God's judgment? The consequences of neglecting and rejecting that salvation are ***proportional to its greatness***.

This morning I'm not going to challenge you to "pay much closer attention to the gospel" and "fix your eyes on Jesus" for the rest of your life. I'd like to challenge you to pay attention to the gospel and fix your eyes on Jesus THIS WEEK. Hebrews 3 and 4 will tell us that the very best day to listen to the voice of God is . . . today. "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts. . ." Our salvation is so valuable that we shouldn't ignore it for another day or week. To do so would be analogous to that 18-year-old grandson leaving the letter from Abraham Lincoln lying on his desk in his dorm room. Something as valuable as our salvation (really Jesus Himself) is worth paying attention to!

If you're not sure how to pay attention to the gospel or if you just need a plan, I'd encourage you to read chapter 2 of Hebrews once a day this coming week (it's only 18 verses). We'll discuss these verses next Sunday morning. The rest of chapter 2 describes (among other things) Jesus' ongoing ministry in our lives. It describes how Jesus is uniquely qualified to understand what we're going through in this life. It describes how we're not alone in the midst of our temptations. If you let it, this passage will engage your imagination about what your relationship with Jesus can and should be. If your imagination is engaged, you won't have any trouble paying attention to Jesus. I hope you're able to come back next week as we discuss these truths.