

HEBREWS

The Danger of Drifting

2:1-4

Introduction

Political tensions were high in the mid-sixties of the first century. In the spring of 66AD the Jewish population of Roman occupied Judea revolted. They seized control of Jerusalem and massacred a cohort of Roman infantry. It was the beginning of the end: Titus and his Roman legions would come and retake the city and ruin the Temple from 68 to 70AD.

There was a swelling of Jewish pride and patriotism leading up to the revolt of 66AD. War was on the horizon and Jews were rallying together. Many nominal Jews were returning to the Temple in order to show their national loyalty.

But not your Hebrew Christian brothers and sisters! The Hebrew Christians had abandoned the rituals and sacrifices of the Jewish Temple when they received Jesus Christ as Savior. They were seen as disloyal traitors during this time of national crisis. They were being persecuted by the general population of the Jews.

The Hebrew Christians were starting to succumb to the pressure. They were contemplating forsaking their Christian assemblies and returning to the Temple.

Their reaction was understandable, but it was not condonable. This letter was written to **warn** them *not* to return to their religious roots. There are five specific warnings scattered throughout the letter. The first is here in chapter two where they are warned, “*Do not drift away.*”

The danger of drifting is not confined to these first century Hebrew Christians. It is a spiritual peril you and I also face. It may, in fact, be the one danger that precedes all of your other backslidings.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Resist The Danger Of Drifting By Reflecting Upon Your Salvation, and #2 You Risk The Danger Of Drifting By Neglecting Your Salvation.

#1 You Resist The Danger Of Drifting
By Reflecting Upon Your Salvation
(v1a; 3b-4)

Commentators disagree as to whether or not the warning passages are addressed to *believers* or *unbelievers*. Dr. John MacArthur, for example, thinks that they are non-Christians, "specifically Jews who are intellectually convinced of the gospel but who fail to receive it for themselves."

I believe the warnings are directed to born-again believers. In this first warning, for example, the writer uses two key words: "we" and "neglect." The pronoun "we" is used over two dozen times in this letter, as well as the pronoun "us." When he says, "how shall **we** escape..." he is including himself among them. By including himself he was not only identifying with them but indicating that he, too, was capable of "neglecting... salvation" and therefore subject to this warning.

The word "neglect" also assumes that they already, actually possessed salvation. *You can't neglect something you do not possess!* The text does *not* say, "How shall we escape if we *reject* so great salvation." These Hebrews had not *rejected* the Gospel, but had *received* salvation. These words have nothing to do with forfeiting or, as some say, "losing" your salvation.

What does it mean, then, to "neglect... salvation?" Salvation refers to more than just the moment you get saved. It encompasses your whole relationship with God from start to finish. There is a past, a present, and a future aspect to salvation:

1. In the past, you were saved the moment you received Jesus Christ as your Savior. We call this aspect of salvation *regeneration*.

2. In the present, God continues His work in you on a daily basis to conform you into the image of Jesus. We call this aspect of salvation *sanctification*.
3. In the future, God will complete His work in you when you see Him face-to-face. We call this aspect of salvation *glorification*.

You are saved the moment you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior. As for your future, God, Who has begun a good work in you, will most definitely complete it. In the present you are commanded to walk in a manner worthy of your salvation. **It is this daily, practical aspect of salvation that the writer is dealing with in this letter. You can neglect the things of God and, instead of making progress, begin to regress and backslide.**

Hebrews 2:1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.

The word “must” is translated “ought” in the King James Version. In the original language it is a word of command, *not* a suggestion. You are commanded to “heed.” Heeding is an active, ongoing *commitment*. The word “earnest” puts additional emphasis upon what is being said. He is **compelling** them to remain **committed** to what they have been **commanded**.

It’s good every now and then to be reminded that the Christian life requires *obedience* and leaves no room for *obstinance*; it requires *obligation* and leaves no room for *opposition*. Many (if not most or all) of our practical problems would be resolved if we would be compelled to remain committed to what we’ve been commanded.

Let me add this: When I use words like “obedience,” “obligation,” and “commanded,” I am not talking about the burden of keeping some religious rules, rites, and rituals. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ is that of children. We are obligated to obey, and commanded to do certain things, because our Father in heaven loves us and has only our best interests in mind.

The danger of drifting is introduced at the end of verse one and is explained further in verse two and the beginning of verse three. Before we look at it I want to finish our thoughts about “heed[ing] the things you have heard.” What you’ve heard is also called “so great

salvation” in the middle of verse three; then it is defined by the rest of verse three and verse four:

Hebrews 2:3 ... so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*,

Hebrews 2:4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?

Have you thought lately about how “great a salvation” you have received from Jesus? It is great because it is the heart of God to save sinners and declare them saints... It is great because it took the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God to make it available... It is great because it is a universal provision of a Savior for mankind’s universal problem of sin... It is great because it sets you free from the penalty of sin, and can set you free from the power of sin, and will one day set you free from the very presence of sin.

It was “at the first spoken by the Lord.” God’s message of salvation was not something new with Jesus. It began in the Garden of Eden and continued as a progressive revelation throughout Bible history. What the writer means by “at the first” is that Jesus initiated the announcement of a finished salvation. With His coming, God had fulfilled everything He had promised.

This is an important point in the context of the first century. Remember these Hebrew Christians were considering a return to Jewish ritual religion. The writer is telling them that there is nothing to return to now that Jesus has “at the first” spoken of the finished work of His sacrifice on the Cross.

The message of salvation was “confirmed to us by those who heard Him.” Jesus chose apostles and sent them forth to proclaim His death and resurrection and the forgiveness of sins. They were eyewitnesses of the risen, glorified Son of God.

God “confirmed” their eyewitness testimony by “signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will...” “Signs” are miracles that reveal a divine purpose; as one author put it, “the *what* of the miracle becomes overshadowed by the

why of it.”¹ “Wonders” show the uniqueness of the miracle. They attract attention to supernatural workings which cannot be duplicated by man. “Various miracles” refer to the demonstration of God’s power in all realms.

Any talk of signs and wonders and various miracles incites our curiosity. Why don’t we see more of these occurring today? Some have concluded that these phenomena were restricted to a brief period of time before we had the completed canon of Scripture when the apostles needed them to confirm God’s Word. That sounds reasonable until you research Christian history and discover that signs and wonders and various miracles continue right up to our very day!

God uses signs and wonders and various miracles as He sees fit. We always think that God would be better believed if He used them all the time; but that is just not true. In Luke chapter sixteen a rich man dies and goes to Hades, the place of torment. Lazarus dies and goes to Hades, but to the part called Paradise. The rich man begs Abraham – who is over in Paradise – to send Lazarus back from the dead to evangelize his five brothers. He says, “if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.” Abraham replies, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

Signs and wonders and various miracles are for today; but they are always in God’s sovereignty.

In addition these Hebrew Christians had received “gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to [God’s] own will.” Spiritual gifts are another big subject we don’t have time to go into today. The point the writer is making is that the Hebrew Christians also had a testimony **within themselves** of the greatness of salvation. God the Holy Spirit resided within them and even worked through them by the various gifts He distributed.

They were thus to *reflect* upon their salvation and thereby *resist* the danger of drifting.

¹ Gromacki, *Stand In Bold Grace*, p. 42.

#2 You Risk The Danger Of Drifting By Neglecting Your Salvation (v1b-3a)

Pressures and stresses inevitably come along. For the Hebrew Christians in the first century it was the pressure to return to Judaism and the stresses of intense persecution. It could be almost anything in your life. Pressures and stresses work against you to weaken your resolve to remain committed to what you've been commanded.

You are compelled to remain committed to what you've been commanded "lest [you] drift away." A better translation (KJV) is, "lest at any time" we drift away. *Any time* reinforces the seriousness of this exhortation. **It could be even one act of disobedience that produces irreversible damage and tragedy.**

That's true, isn't it? There are some decisions we make that cannot ever be unmade due to their consequences. We have a tendency to think we can let down our guard but will have time to repent and recover. We can repent; but we may not be able to be renewed to the place we were before on account of the consequences.

The matter of adultery in marriage fits this description. It is often preceded by a lapse of mental discipline... Then by subtle flirtations... All the while you never think yourself capable of committing the actual sin. You are drifting and you set yourself up to fall. Once you do fall into the physical sin, you may not be able to recover regardless your repentance.

What happened? You began to **drift away**. "Drift away" is a nautical metaphor. It suggests a boat that is not properly moored or anchored being slowly carried off by the current. Before you know it, you're far, far from shore and out in the dangerous waters.

The writer reminds believers that there **are** consequences in life – *especially in the Christian life*:

Hebrews 2:2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,
Hebrews 2:3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...

If you were with us last time this reference to “the word spoken through angels” will make sense. Scripture indicates that thousands of angels were present at the giving of the Old Testament Law. Their attendance elevated them to a place of prominence and authority in the Hebrew mind. In chapters one and two the writer showed the Hebrews that Jesus *was and is* superior to angels.

Under the Old Testament Law, “every transgression and disobedience received a just reward.” A “transgression” is a violation of something God’s Law prohibited. It was to go beyond the boundaries God had lovingly set. “Disobedience” is not doing something the Law prescribes. The “just reward” was the consequence spelled out in the Law. You knew what you could expect when you transgressed or disobeyed! In some cases, restitution could be made and penalties paid. In other cases, capital punishment followed.

If violating God’s Old Testament Law brought consequences, then “how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” The questions calls for the answer, “*We won’t escape!*”

What will happen? If we ignore the warnings we can be **disciplined** by the Lord in this life and **disqualified** by the Lord at His reward seat.

God loves you as His son or daughter and will **discipline** you, even severely, if necessary. Not every trial or tragedy, sickness or suffering, is a discipline for your falling short. But the New Testament does make it clear that God sometimes goes so far as to even bring believers to a premature death as a discipline. God will discipline you in this life to encourage you to press forward as His disciple.

He can also **disqualify** you. Paul spoke of being “disqualified” in First Corinthians 9:27. It is an illustration drawn from track and field. A contestant could be disqualified for any number of reasons and not receive his or her reward after the race was completed. The contestant remained a citizen, but was disqualified from receiving the reward.

The message of Hebrews is both simple and sobering: Be a disciple or you will be disciplined and disqualified. A disciple is one who endures rather than escapes suffering.

Conclusion

Drifting is only the beginning. There are four other warnings: the danger of *disbelief*, *dullness*, *drawing back*, and *departing*. These warnings become stronger as we progress through Hebrews. There may even be a progression in these dangers: If you start to drift from God's Word you will start to disbelieve it. If you start to disbelieve it, you will become dull to it. If you become dull to it, you will draw back from it. If you draw back from it, you will depart from it.

It all begins with neglect. Reflect upon your great salvation or you may neglect it and find yourself drifting into a strong current from which you may not be able to fully recover.