
#1. If we would not fall away it would be a stunning miracle

We have before us one of the most stunning warnings in the Scriptures. In fact, this letter is structured around several of these warnings. There is a warning that we might not escape. The writer of the letter is grabbing us by the face and saying, *literally*, “Pay attention”. Or you will fall away and will not be able to escape a *just* retribution - which means, judgement, punishment, vengeance that we deserve rather than receiving grace that we don’t deserve.

Falling away is natural

In fact this whole paragraph is teeming with words that give the sense that it is not salvation that is natural, but it is judgement that is *natural*. Persevering in faith is *not* natural. It is not the gravitational pull. What would be natural, what is going to happen unless someone will intervene, is that you will *not* persevere, but that you will drift away. Did you notice that when Jordan read this for us earlier? Did you catch the sense that judgement was chasing after us?

READ 2:1-4

The author is telling us to *pay closer attention*.

Lest we drift away

Every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution

How shall we escape

If we neglect such a great salvation?

We are left with the impression that if you do not pay much closer attention, that we will drift away, that we will not escape punishment - not simply if we make a careful choice to reject the Gospel - but if we simply neglect the Gospel.

In the author’s opinion, it doesn’t need to be a conscience, informed, careful choice to turn away from the Gospel that will take a person out. If a person confesses Christ, is part of a church, receives all the wonderful gifts of being a brother or sister in Christ - if, in the end, they are not found waiting for Christ when He returns, it will not likely be that they carefully decided to outright reject the Gospel. More likely, they did not say “i don’t believe in Christ, I reject Christ!”. Likely what happened first is that they began to *neglect* the Gospel. They would say things like “reading my Bible doesn’t earn salvation, so I don’t have to read it”. Or, they will be interested in hearing things about God that are not found in scripture. They might follow a teacher who doesn’t outright deny the Gospel, but who just teaches new things about Christ that aren’t found in God’s word.

Israel’s history before Christ came to them was littered with times when they fell away. It was not something that they had to try very hard to do. A false prophet here and there telling them that one or two of the sins forbidden by God, was *actually* something you could do. A desire not to reject the Lord, but to worship Him in a different way, more like the people who worshipped idols. A desire to *add* to what God had revealed by His prophets rather than simply be satisfied in God’s Word.

The sin in our hearts ensures that our tendency is to drift away from the Gospel. We won’t need to put energy into paying attention to people who add or take away from the Gospel, that will not be hard to listen to. But what will take attention, energy, intention, is being attentive and paying close attention to the Word of God. No effort has to be put into falling away, but it would be a stunning miracle if we did not fall away from the Gospel.

#2. God has always required vigilant attention to every Word which He has spoken

The first chapter from the letter to the Hebrews gave us the ammunition for this sermon. That’s what the word “therefore” means here. Because of what you’ve just heard, you must pay *much closer attention to what you’ve just heard* - meaning the Gospel.

The Gospel was not the first word that God spoke to His covenant people. He spoke at many times and in various ways to them, for generations. We read that in chapter 1:1.

He spoke before through the prophets, who received their message from God through angels - but finally He spoke to us through His Son.

God has a long History of making himself known to His people, culminating in finally revealing Himself in His Son Jesus Christ. God has a long history of revealing Himself, of *speaking* through prophets.

Everything that God ever spoke to His people was reliable.

We read this in verse 2. But we also can see it in God’s dealings with His people. Whenever He made a promise, He fulfilled it. When he decreed judgement, it took place unless there was repentance.

When God promised that He would take Israel out of slavery in Egypt, though it looked impossible to do, it certainly happened.

When God promised that He would give His people the land of Canaan, though it looked impossible to do, it certainly happened.

When God promised to bring a flood over the whole earth, bringing death to all who were not in the Ark with Noah, even though it seemed unlikely to happen, it certainly did happen.

When God promised that even though He sent His people away, out of the land of Israel into captivity, when He promised to bring them back after 70 years of punishment, He certainly did. God's Word has always been reliable, worth trusting, worth counting on, worth paying close attention to - when it was delivered by angels through the prophets. Utterly reliable. Every reason to pay attention to. Not like someone once in a while making a good prediction but often failing. That guy you do not need to pay attention to - but God's Word has always been worthy of paying attention to - God has *proven* His Word to be reliable - there is no excuse, and never has been for ignoring it, let alone rejecting it. This is a hallmark of the Word of God - the God of Israel, the God of the Gospel - Jesus. That God did not give His people no reason to trust His Word. He always demonstrated its trustworthiness, and His people *never* had the excuse that they weren't sure if they could trust His Word. Not so with the gods of the nations, not so with the cults, or the false religions. These are words that we have no reason to trust - they are simply demanding trust with no track record of reliably making and keeping promises.

Worthy of punishment

God's Word has always been shown to be reliable, but to ignore *any* of God's Word brought punishment.

READ 2:2-3

God's Word was never spoken without the *demand* that it be *kept*. God never spoke an unreliable Word, but He also never spoke an optional Word. Never was there a time when obedience to a command was optional. Never was there a time when trusting a promise was optional. Never was there a time when ignoring a warning was permitted. God's laws were coupled with *sanctions* or punishments for disobedience. Over and over, the call of God was *hear my voice and live*. The punishments attached to God's laws, God's commands, are how He clearly communicates that they are, in fact, commands from a King, rather than advice from a neighbour. What God has spoken, all who are created by Him, all His creatures are *bound* to obey. We may feel like we have a choice to care about God's Word or not, but that disappears when God brings punishment for disobeying Him.

God doesn't apologize for demanding obedience to His Word. He is your Creator. He is the one who gave you your existence. He is the one who upholds the Universe with the Word of His power. It is His Word which upholds the Universe, which has set the stars and their orbiting planets in their course - and which *keeps them* in their course. Yes science is wonderful to examine *that* the Universe holds together, and *that* the stars

and planets follow their courses. We can even discover *how* they follow their courses and their places in the sky - what natural forces act on them to make it happen, but the answer to *why* they do, why is it that they exist and why is it that they obey the "laws of nature" - the answer is because God has decided that they would, and He *keeps* them obedient to His laws of Nature.

God does not apologize for demanding obedience to His Word. His Word sustains creation, gave you your very existence, and sustains your existence. His Word is powerful and He has proved His Word to be flawlessly reliable, and how foolishly sinful is it that even though atoms and molecules and planets and stars obey His Word, yet we people do not?

God has always required vigilant attention to every Word which He has spoken.

#3. The greatness of Christ's Gospel makes falling away even more catastrophic

The writer has just finished saying that Christ is greater than the by the prophets and angels, and the word that God spoke through these lesser "preachers" was perfectly reliable, how reliable do you think the word of the Gospel of Christ is? Is that not a reason to pay close attention? Isn't that a reason to reject teaching about God that is not reliable, but just interesting, or simply "might be true"?

The point is that since what the Old Testament prophets spoke was perfectly reliable, and since to ignore *any of it* was met with punishments, and since Christ is *greater* than these messengers, how in the world would we escape punishment if we didn't pay *much closer attention* to Him? The prophets prophesied *truly*, but *in part*. Christ was the full and final revelation of God - the same God who spoke through the OT prophets - the same God who never spoke an unreliable word, never spoke an unreliable promise, never spoke an unreliable *warning*. So how could we hope to escape judgment if we fail to pay attention to His Son's Gospel?

In part vs. In fullness

The Words of God before Christ spoke of Him, they showed why we would need him, they foreshadowed *how* he would forgive His people and cleanse his people, and rescue his people, how he would give life to his people, how he would protect his people, and how he would lead his people.

But now, once Christ had been sent God has now *fully* been revealed. He *came*. He didn't simply send messengers to speak in part about who He was - He *came*.

Rescue from lesser enemies

IN the course of Israel's history which is documented in the many books of the Bible, God promised and provided rescue from enemies which oppressed His people. Such promises and such rescues always proved *reliable* - and those who didn't trust those promises for those rescues were shamed, were judged. Those were great promises and great rescues from great enemies, but Christ provides a greater rescue from a great enemy.

It was foolish and sinful and punishable not to trust God's promises to save from famine and slavery and exile, but how much more foolish and more sinful and more punishable to ignore salvation from your own sin and evil? This is the rescue which Jesus provides. This is a worse salvation to miss out on than salvation from Pharaoh. Pharaoh could only take your life and pharaohs oppression of you would end at death - but your own sin could take your *soul and this would not be finished with death*. Christ provides rescue from your sin.

Atonement from lesser punishments

In the course of Israel's history, God provide them atonement for sin which spared them from punishment. There were punishments which the people brought upon themselves and atonements, rescues which brought an end to these punishments. It was foolish and wicked to ignore those from God. However Jesus provides atonement for a punishment greater than a plague or a famine or captivity, or an exile or poisonous snakes or leprosy. He provides atonement from the wrath of God which makes hell, hell. This is the punishment which Christ provided atonement for. When Christ hung on the cross he took our sin - which is a greater enemy than Pharaoh, and bearing our sin on himself, he took our punishment for that sin. The punishment was the wrath of God toward sin and sinners. This means that either Christ atoned for your sin on the cross or you will spend eternity with the impossible task of atoning for *your own sin by facing God's wrath in hell*. If you missed the rescue from Egypt it would have been tragic, but it would have been a temporary tragedy. It would have been unnecessary and foolish and sinful to have ignored God's promise to rescue from Pharaoh and His call to come out of Egypt, but it would have only had temporary consequences for ignoring that salvation. But to ignore, to neglect the *greater salvation* in Christ, means that you will not be able to escape a greater punishment with eternal consequences - meaning there is *more* reason to pay even closer attention to this salvation because it is so great.

Greater or lesser revelation?

Brothers and sisters, the greater the revelation, the greater the salvation, the greater the gift, the greater the sin in ignoring or despising it. The greater the consequence for despising it. If it was an insult to the Holy God to despise His prophets, imagine what a sin it is to despise, to ignore, to neglect, to not cling to, His Son. If *they* couldn't escape for rejecting, or ignoring the prophets, what makes you think that we'd escape for ignoring the Gospel of His Son?

If casually treating the word delivered by the prophets caught up with them and destroyed them, what makes you confident that you'd be fine if you treated the Gospel casually? If you simply didn't deny it, but didn't cling to it in all the ways in which God has given for you to cling to it? If they weren't able to survive by holding to the scriptures while also trying to hold onto other words about God not found in scripture, what makes you think that you'd be able to hold onto the Gospel while also holding to the words which modern teachers claim to be from God but aren't in God's Word? If that ended poorly for *them* the point is that it will be even more catastrophic for people who try to hold to a *greater* salvation - the Gospel along with extra teaching. If trying to hold to *most* of the words of the prophets while rejecting *some* didn't work out for them, imagine how badly it will go for those who try to hold to *most* of the words of Christ, while rejecting *some* of His words!

This is a *terrible* warning. But it is a good warning from a Good Shepherd, and by this terrible warning, He has *kept* many of His blood bought sheep for 2000 years - in fact He has kept *every* of His blood bought sheep with warnings such as these in the Scripture. If you *are* one of His sheep, if you truly have faith in Christ and so belong to Him, you will hear this and not be offended, but cut to the heart and will turn back to Him, and will pay closer attention to the Gospel than you did before because you could think of *nothing worse* than drifting away from the Good Shepherd who died in your place.

#4. God has confirmed that the Gospel is His ultimate Word

How can we know that this Word of the Gospel, the message of the Gospel, the Gospel of God's Son, how can we know that it is reliable? How can we be certain that denying it would bring us judgement? How can we be certain that trusting in the Gospel of His Son is something that God *requires* of us?

This great Gospel was not simply something given in secret and which a man started to require that people believe. It was *confirmed* by God in

many ways. God made it very clear that Jesus was His Son, and that His Son was His final and complete Word to us.

It was declared at first by the Lord

God spoke by Christ, His Son.

First, **His very person spoke.**

Christ is God's Word made flesh. In Christ the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. To see Christ was to see God. He was God Himself - He Himself was the Word the speech, the revelation of God.

But Christ also spoke by His actions.

He spoke of who God is, He revealed God Himself by His sinless life. He spoke of God by His miracles which He performed. These miracles didn't just prove His authority, they each spoke of something that was true about God. Christ also spoke by dying on the cross for our sins, in being buried, and being raised from the dead on the third day. He spoke through His saving actions. In the same way that God spoke to Israel by rescuing them from Egypt - even just the actions of God, so Jesus "spoke" the Gospel by dying for our sin and being raised from the dead.

Christ also spoke by speaking words. He taught much about God and about sin and our need for forgiveness from our sin, and about how He would rescue us from our own sin by bearing it and God's wrath and dying before being raised from the dead on the third day.

This "speech" of Jesus was *seen* and heard by many many thousands of people who heard him speak, who saw him act, saw him live a sinless life, and who saw him die for sinners, and who saw him risen from the dead. God the Son *spoke the Gospel. By his very life, his deeds and his words.*

It was attested to us by those who heard.

Who were those who heard? They were those people who saw His life, who saw his deeds, and heard his words, saw his death and burial, and saw him risen from the dead. God provided eyewitnesses to His Son, so that there might be credible testimony, to show that this too was a *reliable word*. That the Gospel was a *reliable Word*. He provided the 12 Apostles to be Christ's witnesses - to witness the word. God was eager to demonstrate the reliability of His Son. God made sure that His Son's life and death would speak loudly and clearly, and that many reliable witnesses were provided to witness, to see and to hear as Christ's life and death and resurrection "spoke" the Gospel. The books of the New Testament, come from these eyewitnesses for God was jealous to show how reliable the Word of His Son is.

While God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles

What did those eyewitnesses see? Did they just see and hear a man who claimed to be God? No, they saw and heard a man who

demonstrated that He was God in the flesh by performing the miracles that God the Father had given to Him. The miracles that Jesus did were actually God the Father bearing witness to all that Christ was saying. They were not Christ proving Himself, they were the Father proving the Son.

This was the pattern all throughout God's dealing with His covenant people - all the way back through the Old Testament before Christ - this was the pattern. That when God delivered a new word, made a new promise, gave a new command, warned of a new coming punishment, God always bore witness to His prophets with signs and wonders and miracles. He clustered miracles around the prophets in order to establish His Word. In the OT, these miracles didn't happen every time that those words were preached, but only when those words were *first* preached in order to establish them as the Word of God. This is so that Israel would know which words they were to treat as God's Words and so *pay close attention to*, and which words were the words merely of men and so *ignore*.

So it was with His Son, the full and final revelation, the greatest Word that God *spoke*. Christ's ministry was full of signs and wonders and various miracles - and this was God the Father bearing witness of His Son's Gospel. These miracles were not simply to prove that He can do miracles, but to prove the Gospel - to prove that He was truly the One who would die *in the place of sinners*, who could pay for their sin, who would be able to bear the wrath of God for them, who would be able to conquer death for them, and who would be raised to reign over them and all creation. This is why they are called *signs* - because they don't just prove he could do miracles - the point to something *beyond* the actual sign - they point to the Gospel - and God provided many witnesses *for your sake* - and by these signs and through these witnesses God is testifying that you *must* hear His Son and pay much closer attention to *His Gospel*. God also surrounded the Apostles from whom we have the New Testament Scriptures, with these signs and miracles and wonders, to identify them as the official God-inspired eyewitnesses and spokesmen.

And by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Did you notice how this little phrase is separated by the flow of the sentence from the signs, wonders and various miracles?

The gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will include *non-miraculous ways* which God the Holy Spirit confirms the Gospel in our lives. These gifts include things like preaching and teaching and exhortation, and serving, and faith, and generous giving, and leadership, and acts of mercy toward one another. These are the non-miraculous ways which the Holy Spirit attends the Gospel of Jesus, working it deeper

into the hearts of His people that we might pay much closer attention so that we might not drift away. By these gifts He builds the church, which is a testimony of the Gospel.

God has given us every reason to believe that the Gospel of Jesus is *reliable* - and that it is not just something which *can* be believed, but which requires faith and *careful attention*. God has always required vigilant attention to His Word, even when it was delivered by His creatures - such as men and angels, but how much more so when He speaks finally by His Son?

If you are in a boat on the water, what do you need to do in order to drift? The answer is *nothing*. Nothing has to be done. Drifting is the natural, automatic default. Drifting will happen unless something is done to stop it.

If you've heard the Gospel you have been offered the greatest treasure, the sweetest joy - one which you had no right to demand or expect. Though you've sinned against God and are guilty before Him, standing under His wrath, because of His Great Love, He has given His Son to "speak" a great Gospel to you. That if you repent of sin and have faith in Him His death atones for your sin, and you escape your punishment because He chose *not* to escape it but willingly took your place in order to reconcile you to the God which your heart has warred against. What a great salvation, greater than salvation from Pharaoh or famine or leprosy or exile.

What could be more tragic than to be close to it but to drift away because you considered it so lightly, since you neglected it, didn't pay close attention, tried to hold onto it and other spiritual teachings at the same time, "accepted" it all the while hoping for something more, or simply weren't humble enough to recognize that your heart, like all human hearts, is prone to wander?

Brothers and sisters, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. Let us cling to it in all the ways which God has provided to us. If God gives us 12 ropes to moor our boat to the Gospel and we decide to use only 3 of them that can only mean we trust ourselves more than God says we ought, OR we simply think that the Gospel is of such little value that we're willing to run the risk of losing it.

Perseverance of the saints

How do we reconcile this terrifying warning with Christ's promise found in John 10?

READ John 10:27-30

Christ is promising that all who come to Him by faith will certainly have eternal life - not temporary life as His sheep, but *permanent* eternal life as His sheep.

How then is it that these passages fit together?

What we're being reminded of here is that not only is it a stunning miracle when a person comes to faith in Christ, it is also a stunning miracle when a person *remains* in Christ. It is a stunning act of God if a person persists through trials and temptations and is in the end still clinging to faith in Christ. This is not because Christ is bad at holding onto people, but it actually shows just how good Christ is at holding people fast.

If it was *easy*, if it were *natural*, if it were the *default* for a person to confess faith in Christ and continue to do so for years and years, it would be no feat for Christ to hold them fast. Like having a big mixing bowl with two marbles in it. No one gets an olympic medal for keeping those marbles in that mixing bowl.

Christ, the Good Shepherd is not keeping marbles in a mixing bowl, He is keeping sinful, weak sheep, whose hearts constantly deceive them. Who are prone to wander. Whose flesh is weak. Who are under constant attack from the enemy seeking to steal them away.

And He does. But He doesn't just keep His sheep, those who truly did come to Him with true faith, He doesn't just keep them by snapping His fingers. He keeps them by doing things. He keeps them, as we'll see later in this letter, He keeps them by discipline - bringing things into their life which make them pay careful attention to the Gospel instead of treating it as just one of the things that they have.

He keeps His sheep, which he bought with His blood, He keeps His sheep also by warnings. By calling out to them with warnings. Brothers and sisters, hearing this piece of the Bible, God's Word, and the fact that God made sure a preacher would preach it to you, this is part of Christ's plan to fulfill His promise to the Father, His charge from the Father, to not only convert you, but to also *keep you*. Just like a Good Shepherd calls out to His wandering sheep with *warnings* this is what is happening today - so pay close attention - it will be for your *repentance, and perseverance*. So that you will not drift away.

If you do not pay close attention to the Gospel, if you just don't deny it, but if you don't actually pay attention to it, cling to it, treasure it, seek it, love it, meditate on it, you will very likely drift away. If you treat it as anything other than the *most important* possession that you have, you will not likely be found waiting for Him with *faith* when He returns or when your life comes to an end. Some of you might be thinking that so long as you don't do anything drastic, you and your kids if you have any, will certainly not drift away. You think that you're not likely to fall to a false teacher, or to fall into sin. so, if you've been interested in some teacher

saying things that are not in the Bible it must be ok. But the truth is, here we see it, the truth is that those things *will* happen *unless* something drastic happens. Something drastic doesn't need to happen for you to fall away - its the opposite of that! Unless something drastic is done you *will* drift away. You and I are not like marbles in a mixing bowl. We are like weak sheep that are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love. This is actually a beautiful passage which shows how each member of the Trinity, each person in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all participate in calling out to us to call and *keep us*. Hear His voice, and you will *persevere*. You will not drift away, even though drifting away is natural and the default, it's what happens if someone does not intervene - but thanks be to God, He is a God who intervenes. Today He is intervening by calling out to us with this warning that we might not drift away from so great a salvation. And in this way He keeps His dearly loved sheep which He laid down his life for.