

## HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part five

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### SOMETIMES YOU MUST PREACH WARNING OR THE POWER OF GRACE DISAPPEARS

**Hebrews 2:1-4** - "Therefore we must pay much *closer attention to what we have heard*, lest we *drift away from it*. [2] For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, [3] how shall we escape *if we neglect* such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, [4] while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

This is the first of *five* warning passages in the book of Hebrews (**2:1-4, 3:7- 4:13, 5:11- 6:12, 10:19-39, 12:14-29**). That these warnings are repeated so frequently isn't the most striking feature about them. What *is* important to note is each warning is *strategically placed* in the very center of the author's expositions of the greatness of grace through the redemptive priestly ministry of Jesus Christ freely on our behalf.

In other words, these warnings are intentionally married to the passages magnifying divine grace freely bestowed through the shed blood and heavenly intercession of God the Son. So we're meant to learn something important. Warnings aren't *contradictory* to grace. They are *protective* of grace. The warnings are set in the *middle* of the strongest grace passages because warnings are the conduit through which grace is made effective just as the wires in your house are the conduit through which electricity turns on your lights. *No wires, no lights.*

Let me say it again. If you de-emphasize the warning passages from Hebrews - or all of the other New Testament letters - you don't get *more* grace - as if the place *vacated* by warning *fills up* with more grace. No - not at all. Take away these warning sermons and you don't get *more* grace. You get *less*. Or, as the writer of Hebrews says, you "*drift*" from grace completely in the process of downplaying warning (**2:1**).

We need the balanced teaching of the letter to the Hebrews so we don't confuse the reception of *divine grace* with mere *peace of mind*. Obviously, if the warning passages of Scripture are never studied - if the passages where sin is exposed are never cherished - if God's love is proclaimed as merely Santa-like, stripped of His holy character - if His divine touch is relished as nothing but soothing in its application - we will all *feel* more relaxed and comforted when we go to church.

But divine grace and human serenity aren't the same thing. A person has not necessarily magnified divine grace just because he is no longer challenged about holiness, death to self, and repentance from sin. Feeling relaxed on a Sunday morning in church isn't automatically the fruit of magnifying divine grace.

I'm stressing this because every now and then I talk to someone who will tell me she has moved from one church to another with the explanation she is just a person of "*grace theology*." She is seeking more of a *grace message* and doesn't want to hear so much about wrath or sin or judgment or repentance - "*I'm just a grace Christian, Pastor Don.*"

And then you start to really study a book like Hebrews. You put aside all the slogans and trends and just let its message unfold as the verses roll off the page. Hebrews is a *grace* epistle. Its message is more centered on the effective grace-filled redemptive priestly ministry of Jesus than any other letter in the New Testament. Yet its author protects and explains and exalts that grace with as much *warning* as *promise*.

Was he out of line? Was he legalistic? I don't think so. Perhaps, just perhaps, we're confusing our ordering up of divine grace with the way we order our beverages at Starbucks - "*Yes - I'll have a double de-caff, low fat Mochaccino, with just a touch of Madagascar cinnamon. Not too sweet. And just a half-shot of espresso. And could you make it extra hot? Thank you.*"

Unfortunately, our text won't allow such self-centered theological screening. Doctrines can't be "*special ordered*." We will just have to take the inspired text as we find it. As the Holy Spirit would order things this is the surest way to magnify grace and increase its fruit.

- 1) **OUR TEXT TODAY REVEALS THE WRITER'S INTENTION IN THE MANY QUOTATIONS PRESENTING THE GREATNESS OF CHRIST IN THE FIRST CHAPTER**

**Hebrews 2:1a - “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard....”**

If we didn't have today's text we might be left wondering what all those Old Testament quotes in the first chapter were for. Now we know. “...***We must pay much closer attention....***” And that word “***closer***” is a ***comparison*** word. Immediately we want to ask, “***Closer than what? To what is the writer comparing the attention we church-goers need to give to gospel teaching?***”

We know we are being sent back to the ***first*** chapter for the answer to those questions by the opening word of the ***second*** chapter - “***Therefore....***” So our thoughts are pointed backwards in the text.

And that whole first chapter - and the last half of the second - is a lingering study comparing the ***lesser*** glory of the law and the prophets with the vastly ***greater*** glory of Christ. And so our writer's point is the attention we apply to proper gospel hearing must be ***greater*** than any Old Testament prophet or priest ever gave to the law. Grace is not about ***relaxation***. And the reason we have to be ***told*** that it is much harder to attend to ***grace*** seriously than to ***law***.

There's a very important reason for that. The law ***threatens*** when it's ignored. And most Christians attending church this morning don't think ***grace*** threatens ever. I mean, that's what ***makes*** grace ***grace***. It lands so much more sweetly on the ear - “***Amazing grace, how sweet the sound....***” Grace never feels like it pinches or prods. Law ***warns***. Grace just ***promises***.

And that sweet, light landing of grace on our ears creates a huge problem. Our text won't let us skirt around it:

2) **BECAUSE GRACE LANDS ON OUR MINDS SO SWEETLY WE CAN EASILY DRIFT AWAY FROM ITS CALL TO HOLINESS AND ONGOING TRANSFORMING MOMENTUM**

**Hebrews 2:1 - “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.”**

There is no mistaking our writer's concern. It is easy to drift away from the vivid call and forward pull of ***grace*** all the while justifying such mental drifting as though we are simply avoiding the legalistic voice of ***law***. That's why we're told we must give ***closer*** attention to grace than anyone ever gave to ***law***. Underscore that. You don't just ***feel*** grace. You ***pay attention*** to it.

It is easy to ***drift*** from grace because we convince ourselves grace will never wrap us on the knuckles like law would. And once Christians confuse ***grace*** with ***serenity*** that drifting from the cutting edge of the gospel almost feels ***righteous***. We can kid ourselves into believing this effortless slouching into grace is actually ***Biblical***.

I know Christian people who are ***proud*** of the fact they go to a church that no longer bothers them about their sin. That's how ***drifting*** becomes justified and habitual. But it's not grace. It's a serene, relaxed, spiritual numbness.

3) **THE FRUIT OF DIVINE GRACE IS AN INCREASED SERIOUSNESS IN THE DISCIPLINED PURSUIT OF HOLINESS**

**Hebrews 2:1 - “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.”**

Grace reduces and rebukes ***inattentiveness***. What these Hebrew believers had “***heard***” (1b) was the superior revelation from God in the redemption in Jesus Christ. They had “***heard***” of Christ's infinite superiority over any ***previous*** revelation - particularly in the law and prophets - and even angels.

So now that they've ***heard*** this news, what's next? Is it like that server in the restaurant who just puts your food on the table and says, “***Enjoy!***” as he walks away? Apparently not. Our text says greater ***revelation*** demands greater ***attention***. Grace eliminates relaxation. It is the polar opposite of mental and moral “***drifting***.” If there was any previous drifting from the law of God grace drives such carelessness out of the heart. That's the whole point. Divine grace requires “***much closer attention***” (2:1a) than law. Grace never ***relaxes*** attention. It ***increases*** attention.

Fortunately, the Bible doesn't leave this principle as an unexplained point of theology. We get to see this truth fleshed out over and over again:

**1 Corinthians 15:10** - "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

Behold the DNA of divine grace. This is Paul holding at bay the "drifting" from grace described in our Hebrews text. This is Paul preventing "vain" grace, as he calls it - "...his grace toward me was not in vain...." This is *not* Paul working *for* his salvation. No. This is Paul *attending to - giving attention to* - the pulling power of divine grace in his heart.

4) **THE POWER OF GRACE IS NOT AUTOMATICALLY SUSTAINED SIMPLY BECAUSE WE DON'T RENOUNCE IT**

**Hebrews 2:1** - "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it."

Just to flag the obvious - the writer is not pleading with us to *not* do something bad. He's not telling us *not* to deny the gospel. He's not telling us *not* to belittle the gospel. He's not telling us *not* to ignore the gospel. We mustn't comfort ourselves because we have *not* done any of these things. And what's even more important, we have not *protected our hearts* simply because we have not done any of those terrible things.

This is not a text telling us what we *shouldn't* do. It's telling us what we *must* do. It's not a *negative* text. It's a *positive* one. This text is calling us to *do* something - not to *avoid* doing something. The effects of gospel grace must be *cherished* to be preserved. It is the summons of grace to give divine things their proper worth. And this, we are told, is *impossible* unless we give those things *increasing* attention.

There are some deep principles that don't transfer well from generation to generation. By that I mean there are some truths that have to be *re-learned* by each generation of Christians. There's no way of merely *telling* the next generation about them.

This is one of those truths. The spiritual momentum of the previous generation won't sustain life in the following generation. Even if some of the outward habits of the previous generation are continued each following generation will have to give its own "*closer attention*" to applying gospel truth. In other words, the previous generation can't prevent "*drifting*" for the following generation.

So the obvious issue of this verse is *how do we give* "...much closer attention to what we have heard" (2:1)?

5) **"PAYING CLOSER ATTENTION" TO GRACE IS NOT THE SAME AS ENJOYING THE SOUND OF GRACE**

Let me try to simplify what I mean. There are examples in the Scriptures of people who *enjoyed* hearing what God had to say - in fact, *celebrated* what He said - without paying close attention to it:

**Ezekiel 33:30-32** - "As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.' [31] And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. [32] And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it."

These are people who *hear* what the prophet has to say. In fact, they *like* hearing the prophet. They like hearing him like you enjoy the music you program on your iPod or smart phone. The words of the prophet are like *music* to their ears. I take that to mean the prophet's words make them feel good. They encourage themselves in the prophet's words. They delight in the prophet's words. *But they don't pay close attention to those words.*

They thought the point of God's words was the *feeling those words brought to their hearts*. And if we ever think the feelings we get from God's words is the point of them we'll gradually "*drift*" from salvation. That's the whole point of our text in Hebrews.

6) **"PAYING MUCH CLOSER ATTENTION" TO WHAT WE HAVE FIRST HEARD MEANS BEING DISCIPLINED IN THE CORPORATE LIFE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH**

It's easy to miss the way our writer draws his thoughts around this point:

**Hebrews 2:2-4** - "For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, [3] how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard. [4] while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

There's a lot in these verses, but I want to plant a marker around those words, "It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard.... "(2:3).

Neither the author nor his hearers had heard liberating gospel truth directly from the lips of Jesus. They all depended on the sure declaration of truth from those who had *listened* - "...it was attested to us by those who heard.... "(3). The message - and more importantly - the *power* of that message - is in no way diminished in the hands of the church than it was from the physical lips of Jesus Himself. And it is this "*church-message*" the writer urges upon our attention - and "*much closer attention*" with the passing of time.

Remember - "*neglect*" is the great danger: "...how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"(3). This great danger is menacing because it is by nature *undetected*. How shall we prevent this great "*unthinking movement*" away from truth?

The writer has no magic wand. We keep truth alive *in each other's hearts*. We *hear* carefully. We live *accountably* with each other in Christ. And you can't help notice all the "*we*" words in our text - "We must pay closer attention" - "...what we have heard...." - "...lest we drift away from it...." - "...how shall we escape...." - "...it was attested to us...."

The writer can't even think of himself apart from the community. He can't identify himself as a separate entity. The community is where *anti-drift* begins. The body of Christ, when functioning at its best, is designed to keep you and me from knowing spiritual things *generally*. The body of Christ, at its best, helps its members to know how to go about *considering* gospel truths more *specifically* and more *diligently* than they might do on their own. It helps them to *think about divine truth* rather than just *assume* it.

We are here to *prompt* each other. Refuse to *drift* this year. Fight *neglect* like you would fight cancer. It's a far greater danger to your eternal soul.