



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ♦ DEO ♦ GLORIA

## THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Sermon Notes

*Our Great Salvation*

Hebrews 2:1-4

February 8, 2009

<sup>1</sup>Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.  
<sup>2</sup>For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

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- ❖ In Chapter 2, Verse 1, the author of Hebrews begins one of several “warning passages” found in this book. Unfortunately, many take these passages as *proof-texts* to support a belief that genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ can, in fact, lose their salvation. Yet, when viewed in light of other biblical passages – indeed, much clearer and more explicit passages – such a belief (that one can lose his salvation) is shown to be without scriptural warrant.
- ❖ For example, consider **John 10:28**, where Jesus emphatically states, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

- ❖ Also, **John 6:37-40**: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me, I will certainly not cast out... This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing.”
- ❖ In fact, all of the “eternal life” passages would be meaningless if one could lose his salvation. That is, if *eternal life* could be lost, it would not be *eternal*.
- ❖ Yet, when we come to these “warning passages”, such as Hebrews 2, may we never think that we can lose our salvation; but, rather, God has ordained such passages as the *means* by which to preserve us in the true faith.
- ❖ God always ordains the ends, but He ordains the means as well. And so it is with these passages.
- ❖ Robert Culver puts it rightly when he states, “**God preserves us [by grace] so that we may persevere [through faith].**”
- ❖ Yet, as always, this biblical faith spoken of here has a particular object: the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

<b>I. Pay Close Attention to the Gospel Message</b>
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<sup>1</sup>*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*

- ❑ Here, the author of Hebrews urges his readers [mostly Jewish believers] that they must “pay much closer attention to what we have heard...”
  - “What we have heard” is most certainly the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.
  - Furthermore, it stands in contrast to the rituals of the Old Covenant sacrificial system, which, at this point, has been nullified.
  - This is the nature of the warning, “lest we drift away.”
  - For the first century Jew, the temptation was to drift away from the Gospel of God’s Grace through Jesus Christ *back to* the Jewish traditions and trappings, such as the sacrificial system. The first century Jews had been raised with these traditions, and, no doubt, had come to love them as a part of their heritage. Now, they are being told, they are no longer useful – for Christ has now come and fulfilled them.
  - Yet, as modern-day believers, such temptations also exist. We can become so distracted by the trappings of this world, that we lose sight of the powerful truth of the Gospel.
- ❑ In his modern-day classic, *Mere Christianity*, Anglican Professor C.S. Lewis wrote, “We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in your mind. It must be fed.”

- Further, notice the command to “pay close attention” in Verse 1. In other words, we are commanded to pursue Christ through the reading of the Scriptures.
- Richard D. Phillips, in his *Reformed Expository Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, rightly asserts (although it is not a popular view), “Faith is, first, essentially passive; we do not act but receive, resting upon Christ’s saving action on our behalf. But when it comes to the present tense of our salvation – that which is worked out progressively, namely, our sanctification – this is extremely active.” (p.49)
- The famed 20<sup>th</sup> Century Welsh preacher Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones put it this way: “In the matter of our righteousness and justification we can never say too often that we do nothing, we can do nothing, it is entirely the work of Christ. But once we are saved and given this new life, then the progressive work of sanctification does not call for passivity, and we are exhorted to activity.”
- Yet, “paying close attention to the things we have heard” is often incredibly difficult, for it runs contrary to our sinful nature.
  - Richard Phillips asserts, “...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.”

As Christians, we can become so distracted and even misled by so many things that feel Christian – Christian books, music, movies, even gifted teachers and preachers. Another potential “distraction” is even prayer that is removed and ungrounded in God’s Word. This type of prayer and meditation often leads to highly emotional experiences that can actually to lead us away, rather than toward the objective truth of God’s Word. However,

**there is absolutely no substitute for the Scriptures to anchor us to Christ.  
Nothing else can. Nothing else will.**

- Consider the following passages in John’s Gospel which emphasize this truth:

**John 8:32-33**: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

**John 17:17**: “(Jesus prays to His Father) Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth.”

- Donald Grey Barnhouse, the Pastor of Philadelphia’s historic Tenth Presbyterian Church from 1927-1960, wrote, “It is the Word of God that can establish the Christian and given him strength to overcome the old forces and to live the new. It can never be done in any other way... You cannot find even one Christian on this earth who has developed into strength of wisdom and witness in the Lord who has attained it by any other means than study and meditation in the Word of God.”

- ❑ There is certainly no doubt that every Christian who has ever lived and died would look back to say, “It was God’s Word alone which kept me anchored to the call of Christ.”

## II. The Gospel Message is Superior to the Old Covenant

*<sup>2</sup>For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord,*

### a. Consider the Mediators

- ❑ It is in this Verse that the author to the Book of Hebrews most powerfully demonstrates the superiority of Christ to the angels. The Old Covenant at Mount Sinai had been mediated by angels; whereas, the New Covenant was mediated – fulfilled – through and in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### i. The Old Covenant was Mediated by Angels

- ❑ The author writes, “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable...”
  - This message was, no doubt, the Old Covenant – the Law given to Moses at Mount Sinai.
  - And the author writes that “the message [was] **declared by angels...**”
    - This belief, in the first century, was derived from both Inter-testamental literature as well as **Deuteronomy 33:2**:
 

“Yahweh came from Sinai,  
And dawned from Seir upon us;  
He shone forth from Mount Paran,  
He came from the ten thousands of holy ones,  
With flaming fire at his right hand.”
    - Also, Paul states in **Galatians 3:19** that the Law “was ordained by angels through an intermediary.”
    - Further, Stephen, speaking before the Sanhedrin states, in **Acts 7:53**, that Jews had disobeyed the Law even though it had been “delivered by angels.”
  - Not only does the Hebrews author state that the Law had been “declared by angels” but that it “proved to be reliable.”
    - In other words, **it was true.**

## ii. The New Covenant is Mediated by Christ

- Yet the salvation that the Law pointed to, which is to be found in Jesus Christ, was delivered by the Lord (i.e., the Son).
- So one must then realize that **if the Son is far superior to the angels, how much greater is the salvation that is revealed by Him than the one revealed by the angels!**
- Yet, it is absolutely essential to realize that the Christ did not simply deliver, reveal the Gospel message, **He is** the Gospel message.

### b. Consider the Retribution

- Yet, not only does the author compare the “mediators”; but, he compares the retributions.
- This is the classic agreement **from the lesser to the greater**.
  - Verse 2 states, “the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,”
    - In this Verse, several truths emerge concerning the Law:
      - It was delivered by angels;
      - It proved to be reliable (it was true);
      - Every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution.
- In other words, the Old Covenant was a true, valid, and binding covenant, with rewards and punishments.
- F.F. Bruce writes, “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.”
  - For example, **Leviticus 26** clearly explains the rewards and punishments for breaking the Law.
  - Also, **Numbers 15:30** states, “But the person that does anything with a high hand [intentionally and defiantly]...reviles Yahweh, and that person shall be cut off from among his people.”
  - Consider as well Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who rebelled against Moses and were swallowed up in the earth (Numbers 16:32).
  - Also, Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire in Leviticus 10:2.

- Even the entire Israelite nation wandered for forty years in the Sinai wilderness only to die and not enter into the promised land.
- **Yet, these punishments were related to breaking the Old, inferior Covenant.**
  - Consider, then, how much more the retribution will be, the author of Hebrews implies, for those who reject the New Covenant, and specifically, the object of the New Covenant: Jesus Christ Himself.
  - As the author writes, “*how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*”

Donald Guthrie highlights the truth that ““The idea of escape linked with salvation expresses salvation in terms of deliverance, a concept found elsewhere in the New Testament.”

- The rhetorical question here is intended to emphasize the escape from the full wrath of God which is the just retribution for rejecting Jesus Christ, who is the heart of salvation in the New Covenant.
  - After all, this is the nature of salvation – escape from the wrath of God, through the “Ark” of Jesus Christ. In fact, this is what the Old Testament pointed to – consider Noah and his family, escaping the raging Flood through the Ark provided by God. So it is with the Son Jesus Christ.
- Yet, two words stand out in this Verse that cannot be missed: **GREAT SALVATION**.
  - **Tragically, in modern Christianity, SALVATION is no longer viewed as the greatest miracle possible for fallen man.** Salvation, to so many professing Christians, is simply the avoidance of Hell and the privilege of seeing relatives and loved-ones again.
  - Furthermore, in the eyes of so many, SALVATION is something that God gives to us simply because He loves us so much and appreciates the inherent goodness in people. If not this, then SALVATION is obtained by works and the good-faith effort of people to reach out to Christ and embracing Him as Savior and Lord [possibly with the help of some *enabling* grace]. In other words, SALVATION is a reward from God for “doing the right thing” in accepting Christ.
  - Yet, none of these views comes close to capturing the essence of biblical salvation. For, if we fail to truly understand our “helpless estate” apart from Christ, and consequently, what we deserve – the eternal wrath of God toward our sin – we will never truly grasp the profound miracle of SALVATION by **GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE**.
  - For most Christians, Salvation is not wholly a work of God’s grace; yet, if Salvation is not by Grace **ALONE**, then it is certainly not the **GREAT SALVATION** spoken of here, and throughout the Scriptures.

- And, this is one of God’s means of preserving us – teaching us the profound miracle of our GREAT SALVATION. For when we understand what He has done for us, we continue to seek Him even more, because we *desire* to do so, for He has changed our very nature.
- Consider **Isaiah 46:4**:

“I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”

### c. Consider the Witness

#### i. Signs, Wonders, Miracles

*“It [salvation] was declared at first by the Lord [the Son Jesus Christ], and it was attested to us by those who heard, <sup>4</sup> while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”*

- The concept of **witness** is of tremendous importance biblically.
- **Deuteronomy 19:15** states:
 

“One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”
- As a note, this Verse alone powerfully supports the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity, for **there are always two eternal witnesses to verify the truth of the works of each Person of the Godhead.** In other words, the Father and the Son bear witness to the works of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit and the Son bear witness to the works of the Father, and the Father and the Holy Spirit bear witness to the works of the Son. Further, the witness are all God.
- And yet, even though Jesus Christ is fully God, men and women also bore witness to His miraculous, redemptive works during His earthly ministry. He was always public in His ministry and works.
  - And so it is, here, that the writer of Hebrews states that the message of Salvation through Christ alone “was declared first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard.”
  - That is, the Apostles – the ones who were witnesses of what Jesus Himself said – for they were also commissioned by Christ as well to the office of Apostle.
  - As a side-note, many scholars believe that this Verse is conclusive evidence that Paul is **not** the author of Hebrews, for it seems rather clear that the author was not

an eyewitness to Christ and His works – whereas Paul was through His Damascus Road experience.

- But, then, the author of Hebrews writes that “God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles...”
  - These “signs and wonders and various miracles” were, in this context, certainly limited to the Apostles.

**Notice, that the Apostles bore witness to the Words of Christ, thus validating the truth of His testimony, and God [presumably, God the Father] bore witness to the truthfulness of the testimony of the Apostles [which was the message of salvation through Christ alone] by “signs and wonders and various miracles.”**

- In other words, the miraculous, Apostolic gifts were intended as an authentication by God Himself of the truthfulness of the Apostles’ testimony.
- **Yet, today, the Charismatic Movement seeks to promote the Apostolic gifts [and their continued relevance today] – signs such as tongues-speaking and healing – as an essential element of a heightened or elevated worship experience for the individual worshipper. Yet, this was not the purpose of signs, wonders and miracles in the first century. They were not for the benefit of the Apostles, by making their worship experience in some way deeper or richer; rather, they were for those who heard their message of salvation.**
- They were for the purpose of authenticating the message the Apostles declared.

- **In fact, the belief in the continued existence of such gifts today is one of the great distractions AWAY from the sufficiency of God’s Word.**

## **ii. Gifts of the Holy Spirit**

- Finally, the author speaks of the “gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.”
  - This phrase could very well refer back to the “signs and wonders and various miracles” as the “gifts of the Holy Spirit.”
  - Yet, the point is that the Person of the Holy Spirit (NOTICE the personal pronoun **HIS** in Verse 4) bore witness to the testimony of the Apostles – which exalted Christ – by giving them gifts in accordance with His sovereign will.
  - Notice as well, the testimony of the **Trinity** in these last two Verses: “It was declared at first by the Lord (**the Son**), and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God [**the Father**] also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the **Holy Spirit**.”

- The point here is clear: **Salvation in Jesus Christ is a miraculous work of God alone and is attested by all three Persons of the Trinity.**
- ❖ And may we never lose sight of this truth: God, by His grace, has rescued us from His wrath, not because of anything that we have done, but purely in accordance with the good counsel of His own sovereign will.
- ❖ And may we seek to know God more and more each and every day, by saturating our minds with the Word of God – for this is the essence of eternal life.

**John 17:3**: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”