

**“Death by Apathy”**  
**Hebrews 2:1-4**  
**May 16, 2021**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Today’s passage contains the first of many warnings found in this book. It is a warning of apostasy, of falling away from the Christian faith. The striking thing about this is that the apostasy being warned against occurs not through a deliberate rejection of the gospel, but through the more passive means of apathy. I note that the words used in our passage to describe this falling away are not words of hostility, but the passive words of drifting and neglect. They are the words of inaction rather than overt hostility. It has always been the case that the danger of falling away comes through these more passive means of inaction. C. S. Lewis said it well when he wrote, “And as a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?” The majority of people leaving Christianity do so through apathy and neglect.

We seem to have an abundance of Pierre’s in our nation today. Do you know the Maurice Sendak children’s book by that name? All Pierre could ever say was, “I don’t care.” When his mother asked him what he wanted to eat, he said, “I don’t care.” That was his reply to everything his mother and father said. And then a lion comes upon him and threatens to eat him, to which Pierre replied, “I don’t care.” So the lion ate him. But eventually a doctor shakes Pierre out of the lion and a transformation has occurred, with the result that now Pierre states the moral of the story in the simple word, “Care.” That is what our author is telling his readers and us through this passage when he writes, **“We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.”** We are to take care to pay attention to what the Lord has told us. So there is a danger of which we are being warned and a remedy for that danger. Let’s look more carefully now at both.

**I. The Danger**

As was just mentioned, the two words used to describe the process of falling away from the Lord are both passive words of inaction. The first one, drifting, is a nautical term. A boat is tied up to the dock and someone comes along and slips its mooring rope off the cleat. The boat then begins to drift with the current. The danger is increased by the fact that any such drifting is imperceptible because the boat is simply going with the current. There is no sensation of moving away at all. But in time, it will become clear that movement has indeed been taking place. If the boat is just on a lake somewhere, there is no real danger from the drifting. It might slowly move a distance from the dock, but no real threat is posed by that.

Imagine, however, that the boat is ten miles upriver of Niagara Falls. In this case, drifting poses an obvious danger. Though the changes while the boat is drifting may be imperceptible to those on the boat, in time the consequences of this drifting will become tragically clear as the boat plunges over the falls. As we are going to see in just a moment, it is this second scenario that more accurately describes our danger. We are not drifting on a calm lake, but we are all ten miles upriver of Niagara Falls.

The second word describing the process of this falling away is the word “neglect.” **“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”** (v. 3). To neglect something is to do nothing when you should be doing something. Such neglect often has negative consequences. You can neglect the prescribed maintenance on your car for a time, but eventually it’s going to catch up with you and you will find yourself with a seriously damaged car. Neglect often comes from apathy, and the remedy for apathy is the recognition of the consequences of such neglect and apathy. To return to our analogy of being unmoored and ten miles upriver of Niagara Falls, today’s spiritually apathetic are in grave danger, not unlike someone enjoying a float down the Niagara River while being unaware of the danger that lies ahead.

Our author knows full well of this danger and warns his readers of it. His question, “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” is another way of saying that there is no escape for the apathetic. They must be shaken out of their apathy and made fully aware of their danger. So he proceeds to do that with this contrast between the Law of Moses in the Old Testament and the word of the gospel from Jesus. He points out that transgressions of the Old Testament law were treated with “just retribution.” Numbers 15:30-31 is typical, prescribing the death penalty for intentional violations of Old Testament law. But the message we have received is greater than this Old Testament message because of the one through whom we have received it. This is the application of the truth from chapter 1. In the previous chapter, our author spoke of Jesus’ superiority over the angels. He wasn’t just making a theoretical point. The Old Testament law came ultimately from God, but was mediated by angels. The New Testament came straight from Jesus. Both are God’s word and both are authoritative. But the message from Jesus is greater than what came through the angels in the Old Testament just as Jesus is greater than angels. It is a message of a “great salvation” because it is God’s salvation. So for those who respond to it with indifference, apathy and neglect, there is no escape.

The application for us all is to receive this warning for ourselves and not just for someone else. The danger of drifting and neglect applies to us all. It is the apathetic who think it applies only to others. Paul said it well when he wrote to the Corinthians, **“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall”** (1 Cor. 10:12). Robertson McQuilkin is a past president of Columbia University. He is a mature Christian known for his decision to resign his presidency at a relatively young age to care for his wife who was suffering from

early onset Alzheimer's. He expressed his grasp of this danger in a prayer he once offered. "I fear the Dark Specter may come too soon—or do I mean, too late? That I should end before I finish or finish, but not well. That I should stain your honor, shame your name, grieve your loving heart. Few, they tell me, finish well... Lord, let me get home before dark."

This warning against drifting and neglect is one we desperately need to hear today. We are now emerging from a long pandemic that has affected church attendance in significant ways. When it began early last year, we were very thankful to be able to offer livestreamed services. They were a wonderful provision from God that allowed our people to stay connected to the church and its worship. But the livestreamed services were also perhaps a little too comfortable and convenient, requiring very little from people. There is a real danger here, the danger of drifting. It is an easy thing after a few months to grow weary of livestreamed services only. And then the next step is to neglect to join us for those. Over time, without the regular worship of the church and the preaching of God's word, the heart can grow apathetic. Is it possible that while we've all had our eyes focused on the physical dangers of COVID-19, that we have failed to recognize the even greater spiritual dangers? As your pastor, and speaking for our church staff and officers, I can tell you that this has been a matter of great concern for the church leadership. We are fearful that perhaps many will have wandered far from the Lord during this pandemic. This is a real danger of which we must beware.

## II. The Remedy

If we receive the danger, we are then ready for the remedy. **"We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard"** (v. 1). And then he makes it clear that he is referring to the message of the great salvation **"declared at first by the Lord"** (v. 3). Pay attention to Jesus. The remedy for our danger is to pay attention to everything Jesus said. Don't pick and choose what you like and ignore the rest. Jesus knows what he's talking about because of who he is. His word is completely reliable.

Many today want to receive Jesus' message of love while discounting his message of judgment. Most of what we know of hell comes from the lips of Jesus. He spoke more directly about the reality and horror of judgment than anyone else in the Bible. To pay close attention to what Jesus said will require that we listen to his warnings of judgment with just as much attention as we give to his promises of mercy and grace.

I had another conversation this week with a father whose adult children had walked away from the church. The reasons given by these children were typical of what I've heard over and over again. While believing themselves to be Christians, they find the church to be irrelevant and unnecessary. They believe they are fully

able to stand without any assistance from what the writer of our book will later tell Christians not to neglect—the assembling of themselves together (10:25). They are not hostile to God, but they are indifferent to the commands of the Bible. I recently heard an interview with an author of a book that bore an interesting title. The author had coined the word “apatheism” and used it as his book title. It captures perfectly what these verses describe. It is neither atheism nor theism, but an attitude of apathy and indifference toward God. I have been considering recently the cause of this common apathy, and I think this passage helps us. It is caused, at least in part, by the church’s negligence in emphasizing the reality of judgment, an emphasis Jesus gives repeatedly. Apathy is immediately dispelled in the face of real danger, and there is real danger of judgment for any who wander from the arms of Jesus. Someone mentioned to me this week that the preacher of their church years ago when they were growing up was a “fire and brimstone” preacher. Such preachers tended to be common fifty years ago but are much harder to find today. We seem to have swung to the other extreme and want to talk only about the love of God. Jesus talked about both, and so must we.

What is meant by this command to pay close attention to what we’ve heard? Does it mean that we are to value the red letters of the New Testament over all the rest of the Bible? I don’t think so. Remember that one of the things you find in the red letter section, the words spoken by Jesus, is that the entire Old Testament is the infallible word of God (Matt. 5:17-18). And remember too that Jesus also said that he would send the Holy Spirit to his apostles and that the Spirit would guide them into all the truth (John 16:13). This truth that the Spirit led them to is what we have written in the rest of the New Testament. So Jesus endorsed the whole Bible we currently have. This is what we are to pay such close attention to. It would also include one of the primary means God has appointed for that word to come to his people, the preaching of the word. Note here that they are told to pay attention to what they have *heard*, not what they have *read*.

A divine endorsement of the words of Jesus and the apostles has been given in the form of signs, wonders, miracles and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The words of the Bible have received the strongest possible confirmation from God himself. The Bible contains not just the words of spiritually-minded people, but is actually the word of God to which we are called to pay the most careful attention.

Why does he mention the last of those items, the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” and how do these gifts confirm the Bible as God’s infallible word? There are at least two reasons. First, this shows that our understanding of the Bible cannot be divorced from the church. This language of the gifts of the Spirit being distributed according to God’s will is used elsewhere of the church as the body of Christ. The gifts are given for the building up of the church, which is the body of Christ. This means that other Christians in the church are required for us to pay close attention to Jesus. All of us need the perspective of others to grasp God’s word.

A second reason for the mention of the gifts of the Spirit as an endorsement of the Bible as God's word comes from what Paul said was the greatest of the gifts. It is greater than understanding all mysteries and having the kind of faith that can move mountains. In a sermon he preached on this passage, the fourth century preacher John Chrysostom was insistent that there is a gift far greater than the power to raise the dead and to do the same things as were done in the time of the apostles. He said that this gift is the "more excellent way" of love (1 Cor. 13). We may not be able to convince people of the Bible as God's word by the performing of signs, wonders and miracles. But by the power of the Spirit we can love.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Before concluding, we need to address one of the common questions that comes up with this warning and with all the warnings of Hebrews. Does this danger and its prescribed remedy take away our assurance of salvation? It's not hard to see how someone might conclude that it does. Aren't we assured repeatedly in the Scriptures that our salvation is secure as we rest in the hands of Jesus? So is there any real danger that we might fall away? It is true that the Bible promises that a person who has been chosen by God and who truly believes in Jesus can never fall away. But it is also true that one of the means of not falling away is to heed warnings just like this one.

To say this differently, our assurance of salvation must not be grounded in anything we have done, but completely in the promise of God and the saving work of our Lord Jesus. Sometimes people look for assurance to something they've done in the past. They prayed some prayer or walked a church aisle years ago, so they think their salvation is assured because of that. Notice in our text, though, that the command given to us is to do something in the present. In the present, we are to pay close attention to Jesus. We are to heed his warning and cling to him.

Can you remember a time when you felt the reality of a real danger? A friend of mine and fellow PCA pastor once told me of a time in his younger years when he was rock climbing and got stuck on a high ledge. He couldn't move forward and he couldn't move back. He was stuck in a very dangerous position, and he was several miles deep into the woods. He was with a climbing partner who did not get stuck, and this partner went to get help. It took hours for help to arrive, and it was late into the night before it finally came. What do you think my friend felt when he saw the lights of those rescuers coming through the woods? Deep gratitude. He knew his danger, and now there was deliverance. That is our situation precisely. The danger of falling is real, but Jesus is sufficient for our need. If we cling to him in faith and pay attention to what he says, our hearts will be filled with gratitude and with an assurance of our salvation.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Hebrews 2:1-4**

1. What's the most dangerous place you've ever been in? How did it feel?
2. It was noted in the sermon that the two words used in our passage to describe the process of falling away from the faith are passive words that indicate apathy. The words are "drift" and "neglect." Have you, or others you know of, struggled with such drifting and neglect of the Lord during this pandemic?
3. Do you agree with C.S. Lewis' statement that "the majority of people leaving Christianity do so through apathy and neglect" rather than through overt rejection? Do you know people characterized by such apathy? Have you ever battled apathy in your own life?
4. How does a realization and acceptance of the judgment of God counter apathy? How might you use this to fight apathy in your life or in the lives of others?
5. What does it look like in your life to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard?" What have you found helpful in your practice of reading God's word and receiving the preached word of God?
6. People sometimes ask how the warning of this passage fits with assurance of salvation. In light of what this passage says, how would you help someone who is struggling with assurance of their salvation?
7. Close with prayer for those you know who have fallen away from the church and the Lord through apathy. Pray too for those who may have neglected the Lord during this pandemic, asking that God would work in their hearts to bring them back to himself and to his church.