

Lesson Four

(2:1-4)

THE GREAT SALVATION

2 Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³how 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 him, ⁴while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.

You have noticed that this section comes in the midst of an argument concerning Jesus and God's heavenly messengers. This sort of "aside" from the main thread of discourse is repeated several times in the epistle. The nature and urgency of the subject matter and the author's sharp interest in those who would read the letter provide the reasons for such exhortations as this one. Christians always need to exhort each other and to be exhorted (consider the series of exhortations beginning at 10:19). The necessity of accepting Jesus as savior and maintaining that relationship for life, the manifold difficulties of living for Jesus, the many who have started but did not finish — all provide motivation for such occasions, and for our text.

2:1 — **we** — All Christians, whoever, whenever. No one was/is excluded

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from perseverance in the Christian life. If the author be the apostle Paul (as seems likely), he was not exempt from concern for himself, as is clear from I Corinthians 9:24-27. Judas, that one who was chosen by Jesus, remains forever as an example not to mimic.

closer attention — The message from Jesus has been amply demonstrated already as being superior to any others from God. If it is neglected, what other hope is there? One thing about Christianity: it claims exclusiveness, will brook no rivals, will save only those within its pale. Nowhere is there any room for being both Christian and Hindu, etc. Moreover, if Christianity be true and all else false, then no other religion can provide redemption, regardless of what it is.

lest we drift away — Sermons have often been preached, and rightly so, about the "perils of drifting." Few people who become Christians deliberately turn away — they gradually do so, almost inadvertently (note v. 3 'neglect'). The Greek word in our text was used to describe a ring slipping off one's finger, or the main point of an argument being missed, or of a ship carried by the tide from its mooring. The fact that the drifting is not intentional does not lessen the damage done, the fatal end result. Many years ago E. E. Hewitt and B. D. Ackley wrote the beautiful song "Drifting." The words bring to mind what we are talking about here:

Drifting carelessly with the tide,
Drifting over the waters wide,
With no captain your course to guide,
Drifting over life's sea.
Drifting, drifting, no port in sight,
Drifting far from the gospel light,
Lest you go down in the stormy night,
Drifting over life's sea.

V. 2 — **the message declared** — Basically the Old Covenant scriptures are in mind, though God spoke in other times by angels.

valid — Greek is *βέβαιος*, steadfast, unyielding, firm. The same word is translated in v. 3, 'was attested.' The reason the angel's message was valid is because it was God's word. If God be trustworthy, and he is, then his word is trustworthy. A major reason for trusting God is said to be this very fact, 6:13-20, upon which Christians build their hope. In 12:25-29, the idea is brought up again, this time contrasting the covenants, with emphasis upon the eternal nature of the new covenant, that Christians have received a kingdom that can't be shaken (i.e., destroyed, replaced, etc.).

transgression and disobedience — The Scripture uses eight or ten different terms to describe sin. Here the ideas used are those of willful violation and refusal to listen.

Just retribution — Sinners are punished different ways while here upon earth, though the punishment of hell for eternity is equal for all. Different sins bring different consequences in life, some of a physical/mental nature, etc. Even if one is forgiven of sin so that the eternal punishment is taken away, temporal consequences may still be experienced.

God's sentence upon sin is said to be just (i.e., right or what is correct). Sometimes it doesn't seem that way. Christians, however, have no choice but to believe that what God does in this regard, or in any regard, is just/right. Any other position makes one a judge of God, and makes God appear to be unjust. Such a "god" could not be worshipped or served. Hence, as with the Psalmist, "Let God be true even if it makes (me and) all men to be liars." (See Psalms 51:4; 116:11; Romans 3:1-8).

V. 3 — **how shall we escape** — Nothing is clearer in the Bible than this: no one can escape God's judgment. Furthermore, if Jesus is the (only) way, etc., then not to accept Jesus leaves no other way to be saved (Acts 4:11-12).

such a great salvation — The reasons for its greatness are many. As the Bible reveals, God spent centuries preparing for the coming of his only son in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4). As the Old Testament shows, and as Hebrews clearly reveals, there were many types and shadows in the times before Jesus came, all prophetically pointing to Jesus and the covenant he represented. The message about Jesus is "it" and there is no other.

by the Lord . . . those who heard — Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the Old Covenant (Matthew 5:17) and the foundation for the church (Matthew 16:13-19). He is said to be the chief cornerstone, Ephesians 2:20. He was the message in a true sense as well as preaching it. He gave power and authority to his apostles (John 16:7-15); Acts 1:8; etc.) so that the message they proclaimed would be the correct one. We expect no further message because the message about Jesus hasn't changed, and won't be changed.

V. 4 — **God bore witness** — Sometimes God did so by a voice (Matthew 3:17; John 12:28) or more commonly by what Jesus did (John 3:1ff.; 5:17ff.; 14:8-11), or by working through the apostles (Acts 2:14ff.).

signs — The Greek term *ισήμειον*, which carries the idea of an event pointing to something or someone beyond itself.

wonders — The Greek term is *τέρας*, which conveys the idea of something in an event that provokes consideration by those viewing it, especially bringing to mind wonder or amazement.

various miracles — The Greek term for miracle is *δύναμις*, which is sometimes translated power (as in Romans 1:16). There is some problem with this word, in that what is a "miracle" for one person is not so for another. In any age, the loose use of the term "miracle" will cause

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problems, and it does in our age. However, as the Acts record bears out, and the epistles as well, the things done through the apostles as they proclaimed the message about Jesus brought about many changes in the lives of people (note Acts 4:16; II Corinthians 12:12).

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4:

23. On what basis is the "therefore" written (i.e., "therefore" indicates a conclusion of some sort, based upon a preceding discussion/argument).
24. Why is the idea of drifting and neglect so pertinent?
25. Why was the Old Covenant valid/firm?
26. Do you believe that God is always just?
27. Why is Christianity such a great salvation, according to Hebrews?
28. What message did Jesus preach, and then also the apostles?
29. What part did God play in the proclamation of said message?
30. Would God's participation in such ways indicate his approval?