

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

Can you think of someone you know who was apparently a Christian, but who has now given it all up? What were the steps that led to that renunciation?

INTRO: *often it is 'drift' rather than any dramatic, life-changing denial of the faith ... and 'drift' is a danger for every Christian, as we're going to see.*

QUESTIONS

What are these Christians are being told to do?
And why are they being told to do it?

If 'drift' is our danger, what does that word imply about how it might happen?
What pressures tend to make us drift away from 'what we have heard'?
What influences help to hold someone firm?

What (from the context) have we 'heard' to which we must pay attention?
OR: How does the warning in these verses relate to Hebrews chapter 1?
What do you think it means in practise to 'pay much closer attention' to that?
Why will paying closer attention prevent drift?

Explain what verse 2 is about by turning to Acts 7:38, 53; Galatians 3:19
What do many people think about the 'retribution' in the OT?
What does this verse lead us to expect 'in these last days' of the NT?
Why is God's 'just retribution' an essential part of the gospel?
Why are we being told verse 2?

What does verse 3a tell us about what God has spoken/'what we have heard'?
Take each of the three steps in turn: why are we being told 'declared by God', 'attested to us by the first hearers' and 'witnessed to by God by signs and wonders'? why is each of those steps important for the argument of Hebrews?
What does 3b-4 add to the strength to the warning of 1, 3a?

CONCLUSION

Do we think 'drift' is a danger for us as much as the people we thought about at the start of our study?
How does this passage help us to realise the reality of the danger we are in?

What do I need to do to halt the otherwise-inevitable drift?
Answer that question again being extremely practical in the light of these verses!

What is my responsibility towards you, and you towards me, in the light of this?
Why is it important that I don't miss a single Connect Group this term?!

End with the reassurance of some of God's promises alongside this warning:
1 Peter 1:5; John 10:27-28; Philippians 1:6; Romans 8:32
... those who persevere are those whom God will keep.

Hebrews 2:1-4



Theme of Hebrews

Hebrews is written because of an urgent problem: the readers are on the verge of apostasy. Apostasy is the opposite of conversion; it is 'falling away from' or 'throwing away' Christ (3:12; 4:11; 5:6; 10:35). That is the 'sin' in Hebrews, and the 'temptation' they face is 'drift' (2:1). But their drifting is surprisingly not into irreligion, but back into the Jewish faith from which they had converted.

The main argument (to warn them against this drift) is that in Jesus God has spoken his **final word** (chs 1-4) and completed a **finished work** (chs 5-9/10): why go back to the 'shadow' (cf 10:1)? All of *Hebrews'* dense theology is included to serve the main application of this 'word of exhortation' (13:22).

Theme Sentence for 2:1-4

If you drift from the great salvation of the gospel, how can you be saved?

How this passage fits in

2:1-4 is the practical application of the bracing theology of chapter 1. In 1:1-4, we are given a densely packed series of striking comparisons:

God spoke ...	
long ago	in these last days
at many times and in many ways	(in just one way ... his Son)
to our fathers	to us
by the prophets	by his Son

God is 'speaking about the world to come' (2:5), 'bringing many sons to glory' (2:10) through the completed work of this Son and his 'making purification for sins' (1:3). That's why Jesus is said to be superior (5-14) to angels (!) because it was widely thought that Jewish law was delivered to Moses via angels (Acts 7:38, 53): 'superior to angels' means the gospel is superior to all Judaism could offer.

Since chapter 1 is true ... 'we must pay close attention to what we have heard'. What have we 'heard'? God speaking to us in these last days by his Son. 2:3 is often taken as a text for evangelistic talks, but actually it's addressed to us. If we, Christian believers, 'drift from' (1)/'neglect' (3) the completed purification for sins that God has announced to us, then how can we expect to 'escape'?

Application

- Don't drift!
- Pay closer attention to Jesus
- Hold firmly to the apostolic witness to Jesus

Commentary

There are lots of promises in *Hebrews* but many more warnings, and 2:1-4 is the first of these. Since the whole book is a 'word of exhortation' (even, perhaps, 'sermon'), it's worth being clear that 'warning' is not an inappropriate element in Biblical 'exhortation'. We like to rejoice in God's generous promises but we don't so much want to hear warnings, perhaps because they seem to go beyond what we think God would say. And the thought that we could potentially lose our salvation sounds inconceivable.

So, in response, we are likely to find ourselves asking the hypothetical question: 'can a real Christian lose their salvation?' But *Hebrews* isn't dealing with that hypothetical question; it is written into a more urgent pastoral situation. In 3:16-18, the writer asks three huge questions about the journey from Egypt to Promised Land:

- who were they? Answer: it was all of them.
- with whom was God provoked? Answer: the 600,000 who sinned.
- to whom did he swear they wouldn't enter? Answer: the disobedient.

In other words, 'all' who left Egypt (with the two notable exceptions of Caleb and Joshua) were in this category of the rebellious. 600,000 were, in the end, not the people of God.

That is the cautionary tale that is set before us. It's a story of people who've had what seems to be a proper early development, who have come to hear the gospel, and who then turn out to be rebellious and disobedient. But, in answer to our query 'can a real Christian lose their salvation?', we're simply told: 'make sure you don't!' The point of *Hebrews* is to exhort us, the reader.

- 1 The logic here is important. 'Therefore ...' implies that these verses are spelling out the obvious conclusion to draw from 1:1-14. If it doesn't seem so obvious to you, then you've probably misunderstood the thrust of chapter 1! What is the 'what we have heard'? 1:1-2 is the context: we have heard God speaking to us by his Son. What has God spoken to us by his Son? Answer: 'such a great salvation' (2:3). 'As God had no greater messenger than his Son, he had no further message beyond the gospel' (Bruce). Departing from this gospel, from his truth and his word is to depart from God (cf Galatians 1:6). And to drift from the message we've heard is to neglect the great salvation we've been offered: we will never reach the great inheritance (1:3) or be brought to glory (2:10).

Of course, the quite surprising thing is that *Hebrews* never quotes any words that Jesus spoke during his time on earth. Instead, it puts words from the OT onto his lips, which, we are told, the Son 'speaks' now (eg 2:12-13). So we mustn't misread 1:1-2 as if it is being dismissive of the OT. Rather, the OT is an incomplete book through which God continues to speak ... but we now see that its fulfilment is (in the sense that it always was talking about and pointing forward to what is now realised) in the completed work of the Son.

Note that their danger is 'drift' rather than any great life-changing renunciation of Christ. It is what 6:12 describes as being 'sluggish'. The implication is that that doing nothing will result in the loss of everything.

- 2 The stakes could scarcely be any higher. 'The message declared by angels' means 'the old covenant' (cf Acts 7:38, 53; Galatians 3:19). That OT law exacted heavy penalties for disobedience: the sinner must be punished, or ultimately die. If that was true for the shadow/anticipatory/imperfect old covenant, then it's going to be even more (and not 'even less') the case when we are talking about the 'now-in-these-last-days' word of God. This is one of those places that most directly answers the challenge 'God was nasty and angry in the OT and then got nicer and loving in the NT'. No ... the expectation of retribution is no less now.
- 3 The 'we' are those to whom *Hebrews* is addressed and includes the author too. It's not just 'Christians-with-issues' but 'Christians' who are in potential danger. Of course, this verse is no less true for non-Christians: they too cannot expect to escape if they neglect the gospel. But they are not the group of people actually being addressed. This is not an evangelistic address (ie inviting outsiders to listen), but written to Christians who've heard the gospel: it is to us in here (not them out there).

There are a whole series of such so-called 'warning passages' in *Hebrews* (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-39; 12:15-17, 25-29) which 'set out the serious consequences for any who deliberately turned their backs on this superior way. It would be tantamount to asserting the superiority of the old and identifying with those who were responsible for crucifying the Son of God' (Guthrie).

3b-4 further describes what we have heard and must not drift from. It was ...

declared by God

which takes us back to and repeats the central affirmation of 1:1-2.

attested to us by the first hearers

The God who spoke through his Son (1:2) spoke first to those who heard him then - the apostles (Acts 1:21-22) who were in the company of Jesus from the beginning and who witnessed his resurrection. Their job was 'to make known what they had seen and heard' (1 John 1:1-3).

witnessed to by God by signs and wonders

This phrase is not about whether signs and wonders accompany the preaching of the gospel today. It is referring to 'the signs of an apostle' (2 Cor 12:12) that were given then, so show that the message they preached then was indeed the authentic word of God. What was needed was a demonstration that God was speaking: 'signs and wonders' bear witness to that fact. We may draw the inference that therefore signs and wonders are not needed now to authentic our message: so long as we hold to that apostolic message that God authenticated then, we shall reach that great salvation. We tie ourselves to that for that is the 'word' God has endorsed.