

The Warning of Christmas: Hebrews 2:1-4

It was winter 2003 when Carrie and I experienced our first Christmas season. She loved Christmas, holiday traditions, and the aura of Yuletide joy. I was a scrooge. Flash forward 13 years later, and I can sing with others, that this is “the most wonderful time of the year.” And yet, today, I want to warn that Christmas sentimentality is just as dangerous as being a Christmas scrooge. The lights, sounds, smells, and sentiments of Christmas can numb us to the shocking nature of Christmas. Christmas comes with a warning. Christmas issues a clarion call. We see the warning of Christmas in the first four verses of Hebrews chapter 2.

Hear the warning of Christmas: ^{NIV} **Hebrews 2:1** We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ² For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The warning could be summarized this way: **Hold fast, salvation is on the line--a sure and certain salvation.**

The passage begins with the application, centers on the warning, and then closes with the rationale. Let’s walk through these verses in the same way. First, then the application in verse 1: Hold Fast.

This application has both a positive and negative component.

The positive component is “we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard.” The writer says, we must earnestly and intentionally keep a tight grip on the truths of Christianity. These are the precious pages of sacred Scripture and the doctrines that flow from the Bible. These are the precious truths that give direction to our lives. It’s crucial we keep our ears attentive to these truths and our minds fixed on them.

Picture your life as a voyage on the sea. Our lives are like ships. We have to avoid shallow waters, steer around treacherous islands, and keep our hand upon the steering wheel. We must not lose sight of our end goal and regularly reorient the ship to our intended destination.

To avoid drifting is the negative warning. Drifting occurs due to inattention. We lose sight of the course and the destination and so we begin to fade. We want to reach the havens of heaven and arrive at the harbor of hope, but neglect ensures disaster.

The picture the writer draws is a ship at sea with a pilot asleep at the wheel. Anyone looking in on such a picture feels the lurking danger. We shake our head at the negligence; we fear the imminent disaster. But the sleeper is unaware, unconcerned, unprepared.

Now, we know from the previous weeks' sermons that the drifting the writer warns of is not outright flagrant disobedience. The situation is not Christians about to publicly declare in the Cedar Rapid's Gazette's editorial section that they are now convinced atheists. The drift is allowing Jesus to be moved from the center of our lives. For these 1st century Christians, they are being drawn toward a fascination with angels. Where Jesus (his life, teaching, death, and resurrection) was once prominently the center of their attention, other things are moving in. Others are fascinated by some of the components of their former religion and way of life. No longer is their life solely centered on Jesus and trusting Jesus...it's Jesus + religion.

And that's the warning...if we allow anything to be at the center of our lives besides Jesus, we're no longer holding fast. The ship drifts; the pilot sleeps; danger lurks.

In such a scenario, my mind quickly runs to a character in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. For those of you who don't know, these books document a drawn out story of power-hungry sorcerers seeking to dominate normal humans, and good sorcerers who seek to protect common people and the world as it is. One of the good sorcerers is a man named "Allister Moody," (AKA Mad Eye Moody). Mad-Eye has spent his life defending good from evil. He spends his life dedicated to protecting the innocent from the wicked. And his life mantra is, "Constant Vigilance." Enemies are everywhere, "Constant vigilance." Deceits are around every corner, "Constant vigilance."

The same could be true in the spiritual life. We must hold fast. We must cling to what is good and hate what is evil. We must pay careful attention. We must not drift.

We must not drift with our minds; daily they must be saturated with the Scriptures.

We must not drift with our bodily appetites; the desires of the flesh always wage war with the desires of the Spirit.

Turning to comfort, power, or pleasure can begin a long drift in the wrong direction. Dear friends, hold fast...

But the natural question is why. Why must we hold fast? Why should constant vigilance be the cry of our hearts?

Answer: Because salvation is on the line.

Look back in the text with me: ^{NIV} **Hebrews 2:1** We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ² For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?

Again, we have a positive and negative contrast. There is punishment and there is salvation.

In verse 2, the writer refers to punishments brought about by disobedience. The punishments he's talking about are the consequences that befell the Hebrews in the Old Testament. Remember, that

for 400 years, God's Hebrew people were in slavery in Egypt. God used Moses, 10 powerful plagues, and eventually the parting of the Red Sea to free his people. Then, these people came to the Mountain of Sinai. And it was at that mountain where God gave them the 10 commandments and a series of commands and promises related to entering into the Promised Land of Israel.

Earlier in the New Testament, a young Christian named Stephen spoke of these events with these words: ^{NIV} **Acts 7:38** He [Moses] was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us. ³⁹ "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

Jews believed that Moses received God's instructions on Mount Sinai through angelic messengers. As the writer in Hebrews notes, these were binding messages. **If they were obeyed, the people would be blessed If disobeyed, there would be curses.**

That was the arrangement. It was set in stone. We reap what we sow. Despite it's many drawbacks, there is a certain truth to the doctrine of karma.

And so, when you read the Old Testament, you see the people of God violating God's commands. He told them to trust Him, but they doubted. He told them to boldly enter the Promised Land, but they refused to go in. He told them to follow Moses, but they tried to establish their own leaders. And each time they violated God's Word, consequences came.

Look again at what the writer of Hebrews says: ² For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord...

Here's his point. The salvation of the Jews out of Egypt and the inheritance of the land of Israel was a rich reward, but these are very small compared to the great salvation of Jesus Christ.

We're not saved out of Egypt, but saved from hell, saved from death, freed from Satan. We're not promised a small tract of land in the Middle East. We have the hope of heaven, a new heaven, a new earth.

If the Jews experienced punishment for disobeying God regarding those earthly gifts and earthly promises, how much more so will we taste punishment for ignoring God's promises of eternal gifts and eternal promises.

How Great is this Salvation? This is an important question. If we don't understand how great the salvation is, it would be easy to drift. If we don't recognize the consequences for ignoring such a great salvation, it's not surprising we'd give our attention to other things.

I like to put this great salvation under 2 categories: What are we saved from? And what are we saved for?

First, what are we saved from? For starters, we're saved from death. The consequences of sin is death. Jesus died so we do not have to die. We're saved from death. Christmas is about God becoming human...he becomes vulnerable so that He can die for us.

We're also saved from punishment. The guilty must be held to account by a just judge. And so Jesus took the punishment of the guilty so we could be spared. God made him who had not sin to be sin for us. God could not allow sin to go unpunished, so in love, he took the punishment himself.

We're saved from alienation and isolation. When a relationship is ruptured by an offence, two parties cannot be united. As such, humans have been alienated from God because of our sin. Our iniquities have separated us from God. But through forgiveness, we can be restored and welcomed. In fact, we become adopted children of God. We aren't just renewed acquaintances with God; we join his family.

These are just some of what humans can be saved from--from death, from punishment, from alienation, and isolation. A salvation not earned by human action, but procured by divine action.

But salvation isn't just a salvation from things, but a salvation for things...

We're saved for service. We can now serve God and others with love and power through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. A lot of people serve God and serve others to get things—maybe it's just a good reputation. Others serve thinking this is how they earn heaven. But if we're saved by God's grace, we don't go out serving trying to earn, instead we serve out of the joy of already being saved. We can serve people freely.

Second, we're saved for purpose. God's will and presence in our lives gives meaning to every moment of our days. We're fixing the pipes for God, running spreadsheets for God, changing diapers for God, investing in missionaries for God. God has work for us to do...whether we're 6 years old or 96 years old. Whether we're an able-bodied 17 year old or a quadriplegic 50 year old, God can and will use you for His purposes.

We're also saved for a life beyond this life. This is not all there is. Every sacrifice here will be rewarded there. Every service here will reap dividends there. When we say no to pleasure and satisfying our desires here, there will be a day when we taste deeper pleasures there.

In the past month, I've read articles about churches in both Australia and Canada. It's news I've read about America in past years as well. It's simply this: churches and denominations that quit preaching about the reality of hell, salvation from sin, and the necessity of believing in Jesus Christ all shrink. People quit attending, dollars dry up, and churches close their doors. Some secular people aren't sure why, but the writer of Hebrews tells us.

If we lose the greatness and necessity of salvation, there leaves little reason to stay focused on Jesus. We might as well drift to a Sunday afternoon soccer match or get a few extra hours of sleep. If salvation isn't on the line, then sleeping at the wheel of life doesn't seem too risky.

Oh, but the writer of Hebrews says, Hold fast, salvation is on the line—a sure and certain salvation.

Carrie's grandfather Keith was a WWII hero and a part of the Greatest Generation ever. He was a hard-working and successful farmer and served with many in rural South Dakota to get phone service (and eventually internet service) to the far reaches of rural counties. He was also stubborn. So when the doctor told him he had Type II diabetes and he needed to change his diet, Keith ignored the advice. Carrie remembers grandpa sneaking all manner of donuts, snacks, and desserts despite the doctor's warnings. Keith died before his time because he ignored the doctor's orders.

The doctor wasn't using scare tactics. He was speaking on matters of reality...on matters of life and death. Similarly, the writer of Hebrews is not using cheap manipulation to wake up the original readers. Salvation is and was on the line. I'm not attempting to make you feel uncomfortable just so I can one-up you.

What faces us is more serious than diabetes, cancer, or even physical death. **We're talking about a sure and certain salvation or a sure and certain damnation.**

^{NIV} **Hebrews 2:3** how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The application is to hold fast. It comes with a warning: because salvation is on the line.

And now we have closing words on the certainty of this salvation.

If you go to a Hindu, they will tell you they believe in reincarnation. A natural question would be, so what's your proof? Has there ever been an interview with a chimpanzee who can document their previous life as a kangaroo? Has a person in Japan ever had flash backs as a dog in America that explains their previous life, dog owners, and appreciation for Kibbles and Bits?

Compare that to Christianity.

One modern Christian has described Christianity as the most falsifiable religion. Everything Christians profess to be true related to real space, real time, and real history.

Now when I say proof, I don't mean a slam dunk argument. There is no such thing in philosophy or theology. For instance, I cannot prove to you that humans have the ability to think because I would be using human thinking to do it. I cannot prove to you that I'm not simply dreaming about reality, while being plugged into a Matrix-like machine. I cannot prove to you that a God-beyond all comprehension exists because if he's beyond all comprehension, you won't comprehend Him as incomprehensible.

There are certain things we can only know by inference, by comparison, by logic, but in the end, nothing can be perfectly known without some measure of doubt. That being said, Christianity says it's truthfulness is based on real human people, and real human events, occurring in real human history.

For starters, the writer of Hebrews says salvation is sure and certain because of the testimony of Jesus. This would include Jesus' words, his miracles, his whole life, his documented death, and his resurrection.

On one occasion, Jesus said this to his follower: ^{NIV} **John 14:10** Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

You can read any historian whether Christian or not they all agree that Jesus was a real historical person who live and died in the 1st century. They agree his death was by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, with many non-biblical sources naming Pontius Pilate as the Roman leader. They even agree that his earliest followers went from fear to deep faith, proclaiming near and far that Jesus had resurrected from the dead.

The question remains, what is the most likely scenario that would cause fiercely monotheistic Jews to begin worshipping and honoring a human Jesus as the Risen Lord of the universe?

Answer: Jesus really rose from the dead. His words, deeds, life, death, and resurrection testify to this reality. Salvation is sure and certain because of the testimony of Jesus.

But the Hebrews' writer says there is more evidence. The salvation is sure and certain because of the original apostles. These were the original men who walked with Jesus, knew him before crucifixion, and spent the 40 days with him after the resurrection. There were also several hundred others who spent time with the resurrected Jesus. Their own words proclaimed salvation. Many of them proclaimed Christ in the face of suffering. Some even dying for their faith in Jesus.

Another 1st century writer, this being one of Jesus' closest companions before death and after his resurrection, penned these words:

^{NIV} **1 John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Robert Yarborough, a modern biblical scholar, says these verses read as if, the Apostle John is "swearing a deposition." In the ancient world, they did not have DNA testing nor finger-print identification. But they were still intelligent people who believed a case should be made in court for something to be believed as true. Ancient people are not backward, foolish, or gullible. A bit less scientific, but no less reasonable.

In John's deposition, he affirms first that it was numerous witnesses who have seen the resurrected Jesus. Then, he says numerous people have heard not only the words of Jesus vibrating in

their ear canal, but the meaning and significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from the Lord and Savior Himself. And as if he knew that one day 20th century scholars would call it a mass hallucination, John says, we've touched this Jesus. And what's on the line in 1 John 1 – eternal life. An eternal life available to those with eyes to see and ears to hear. To anyone and everyone willing to give their attention to Jesus and to those unwilling to drift from Jesus.

John and the writer of Hebrews are in agreement: Hold fast, salvation is on the line—a sure and certain salvation.

Third, salvation is sure and certain because of the Holy Spirit's confirmation. In the 1st century and for 2,000 years since, the Holy Spirit has confirmed the reality of Jesus Christ and the surety of salvation. Lost sinners, wicked souls are profoundly transformed by the forgiving grace of Jesus. Miracles occur. And despite the efforts of many forces to stop Christianity, it has grown exponentially without fail. So many religions come and go, but Christianity persists. The Spirit confirms the truths of Christianity in history, but he also doesn't it in the human heart. We believe a real God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This real God can work on the human heart in a real way. You can be born again by the Spirit so you might know the incredible riches of Jesus Christ.

All of these things are true or they are bold-faced lies. But the writer of Hebrews wants to alleviate our doubts. This is a sure and certain salvation.

There was a famous Irish politician by the name of John Philpot Curran (1750-1817) who once remarked, "The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance."

Each year Christmas arrives...we can receive this season with warm sentiments or as a regular reminder toward constant vigilance. We can smile at mangers and sing the carols with happy thoughts. We can appreciate time with family, warm memories of years gone by. These things happen, but let us not allow the season to go by and realize a warning comes each Christmas season too.

Christmas is a needed reminder for us to marvel at the Christ who came and died.

Let our hearts be moved to wholeheartedly praise Him regarding this great salvation.

If we drift from faith in Jesus Christ, we lose everything that truly matters.

So come let us adore Him. O, come let us adore Him. O come let us adore Him, Christ, the LORD.

Benediction: ^{NIV} **2 Peter 3:17** Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.