

Message Four: The First Warning

Hebrews 2:1-5 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 4

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Three messages have been spent in Hebrews chapter one, and if you've been with us, you know why. We were not stalling, we were laying a foundation, and now it's time to build on it. Chapter one told us the Son is preeminent above the angels, that His *Sonship* means He will rule, that fallen angelic powers presently hold a dominion that belongs to Him, and that seven Old Testament witnesses all point toward the same coming day when He takes His throne.

Chapter two opens with two words that tell you the foundation was never the point in itself: "Therefore we must." Everything we spent three messages establishing about *who the Son is* now becomes the reason for an urgent, personal command. Now we'll look at the first of five great warnings that run through this letter — and once you see what's actually being warned against, you will understand why the author spent an entire chapter setting it up before he said a word of caution.

I. For This Reason — Why Chapter Two Cannot Be Read Alone

Look at how chapter two begins: "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away" (Hebrews 2:1). That word "therefore" is a hinge, and it swings in exactly one direction — backward, into everything chapter one just said. You cannot understand this warning by reading chapter two in isolation. The weight of the warning depends entirely on the weight of the Speaker described in chapter one.

Think about it this way. If an ordinary teacher tells you something is important, you weigh his words accordingly. But if the radiance of God's own glory, the exact representation of His nature, the One who upholds the universe by the word of His power, the Son who was begotten for an everlasting throne — if *He* is the one speaking, and speaking about something this letter is about to call "so great," then drifting away from it is not a small mistake. It's the most serious kind of mistake available to a human being.

II. Drifting — The Danger Named

Read the full warning: "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard

Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?" (Hebrews 2:1-4).

Notice the verb — "drift away." That is not the language of open rebellion. Nobody drifts on purpose. A ship drifts when the current moves it and nobody is minding the helm. This is a warning about neglect, not about defiance — about the slow, unnoticed slide of attention away from something you never consciously decided to abandon. That should unsettle you more than a warning about outright rejection would, because drifting doesn't announce itself. You don't wake up one morning having decided to drift. You simply fail to pay attention long enough, and the current does the rest.

Now notice the phrase "so great a salvation." The word behind "great" here is not the ordinary Greek word for great — the common word used dozens of times across the New Testament. This is a rare, heightened word, used only a handful of other places in Scripture. It describes a death so severe it nearly killed Paul in Asia (2 Corinthians 1:10). It describes an earthquake so violent that Revelation calls it "such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth" (Revelation 16:18). This is not casual language. The *salvation* that is being described here, the author reaches for the same word he'd use for a catastrophic earthquake to describe how enormous it is — and then asks the obvious question: if *that's* what's at stake, how shall we escape if we neglect it?

And the argument leading into that question is an argument from lesser to greater. The word spoken through angels — the Law delivered at Sinai — was steadfast; every violation of it received exactly the consequence it deserved. If that word, mediated by created beings, carried that kind of weight, how much more the word spoken directly by the Son Himself — the same Son whose preeminence over angels took us three entire Messages to establish?

III. The Salvation Being Warned About Isn't the Salvation You Already Have

Here is where careless reading does the most damage, so slow down with me. When most people hear the word "salvation" in a Bible passage, they immediately think of the moment they trusted Christ and were born again. But that is not automatically what this word means every time it appears, and reading this warning as a threat against your eternal security badly misreads what the author is doing.

Scripture speaks of salvation in three tenses. There is a salvation you already have, completely, finished, the moment you believed — based entirely on Christ's finished work at Calvary, nothing added, nothing at risk (Hebrews 1:3). There is a salvation being worked out right now, your present sanctification, walking by the Spirit rather than the flesh — which is why Paul can tell believers to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) without ever suggesting they could lose what's already been given. And there is a salvation still future, still being revealed, tied directly to Christ's return: "To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Hebrews 9:28).

That future salvation is exactly what Hebrews 1:14 already told us angels are presently serving on behalf of — "those who will *inherit* salvation." Not those who will receive salvation for the first time. Those who will *inherit* it. That is the same salvation in view in 2:3, and it's the salvation this whole warning concerns. Peter opens his first letter with the identical structure: a living hope already secured through the resurrection (1 Peter 1:3), an inheritance "reserved in heaven," kept "for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (v. 5), and present trials that prove and refine faith until it results in "the salvation of your souls" (v. 9). Peter even tells us the Old Testament prophets searched their own writings trying to understand the timing of this — "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" — and that angels themselves "desire to look into" it (1 Peter 1:10-12). This is not a minor doctrinal footnote. It's something prophets searched for and angels long to understand.

IV. An Inheritance, Not a Gift

So if this future salvation isn't our initial life-giving salvation (freely given when we first believed — Eph. 2:2-9), what is it? Scripture calls it an inheritance — and an inheritance, by definition, is something distinct from a gift. A gift is given; an inheritance is received by an heir, according to the terms of the inheritance.

Paul tells us plainly what Abraham's inheritance was: "the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13). The heir of the world. And Paul tells believers directly that we stand in that same inheritance: "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). Set that beside what we learned before from Psalm 2 — that the Son's own inheritance is the nations, the uttermost parts of the earth. The category of inheritance being offered to you is not a smaller version of something else. It's the same category the Son Himself was promised.

But look closely at how Paul describes becoming a joint-heir, because there is a condition attached that is not attached to becoming a child of God in the first place: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:16-17). Becoming a child of God costs you nothing but faith. Becoming a joint-heir who reigns with Christ is conditioned on something more — suffering with Him. Paul doesn't flinch from that condition; he immediately puts it in perspective: "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (v. 18).

This is the same pattern we traced in prior messages in this series, in the wedding garments of Psalm 45, fragrant with myrrh before they were anointed with the oil of gladness. Suffering precedes glory — for the Bridegroom, and for everyone who will stand beside Him at the wedding.

V. The Kingdom of the Heavens — What This Salvation Actually Is

So what, specifically, is this inheritance? Hebrews tells us directly, in verse five: "For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels" (Hebrews 2:5). The salvation this whole warning concerns is the world/age to come — the coming reign, the kingdom Jesus offered during His earthly ministry.

In the original language, that offer was never "the kingdom of heaven" in some vague, singular, spiritual-realm sense. It's "the kingdom of the heavens" — plural — and it means exactly what it says: the rule of the heavenly realm over the earth. Right now, that heavenly rule over the earth is held illegitimately by Satan and his fallen angels, exactly as we saw in prior messages. That rule from the heavens is precisely what Jesus offered the nation of Israel during His earthly ministry, and precisely what the nation, as a nation, rejected. It is the same offer now extended to the Church — believers being called, gathered, and prepared to reign from the heavens alongside the Son when He takes what belongs to Him.

That is why the author immediately mentions the confirmation of this message "by those who heard Him" — the apostles' preaching from Pentecost forward — "God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Hebrews 2:4). Those signs and wonders were never random displays of power. They were God's own validation, first to Israel and then to the Church, of the King and the kingdom being announced.

VI. How Shall We Escape?

Now put the whole argument together. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3). The question is rhetorical, and the answer the author expects you to supply is blunt: we will not escape. Not escape hell — that was never in view here. We will not escape the consequences of neglecting an inheritance that was set before us and simply allowed to drift out of reach through inattention.

This is the consistent shape of every warning we'll study in this letter; so fix it now, at the very first one, and you'll be able to read the next four correctly. These warnings are never about whether you belong to God... that was settled the moment you believed, and nothing in this letter threatens it. These warnings are about whether you press on to the fullness of what belonging to God was always meant to lead toward — reigning with Christ, rather than merely being present when He reigns.

VII. Applying the First Warning

So what does drifting look like in an ordinary week? It rarely looks dramatic. It looks like a Bible that goes unopened long enough that you stop noticing it's unopened. It looks like prayer becoming an afterthought instead of a lifeline. It looks like the things of this world growing louder in your ears

than the things of the world to come — not because you renounced Christ, but because you simply let the current carry you while your attention was elsewhere.

And what does suffering with Christ look like, practically, for you this week? It looks like standing for what's right when it costs you something with your friends, your coworkers, your family. It looks like doing the Father's work even when you're exhausted and nobody notices. It looks like choosing obedience when disobedience would be easier and no one but God would ever know the difference. That is not suffering for suffering's sake. That is the pattern Christ walked before you, and it is the pattern His inheritance is attached to.

Take heart in this: the same God who calls you to this kind of vigilance has "loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace" (2 Thessalonians 2:16), and He is able to "comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work" (v. 17) as you do it. This warning is not meant to leave you anxious. It's meant to leave you awake — paying earnest heed, holding the helm, refusing to drift, because so great a salvation is worth staying at the wheel for.

Looking Ahead

Next week, we continue in Hebrews chapter two, moving past the warning itself into the section that explains exactly how the Son — through His own suffering — became fully qualified to bring many sons to glory.