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## **Drifting Away** Hebrews 2:1-4

In the first chapter of Hebrews, the author quotes several passages from the Hebrew Bible to show that God had been communicating to God's people from the beginning, through angels and prophets, but the people had not listened. But the Messiah – the Christ – is even greater than the earlier revelations. We pick up the argument in Hebrews chapter 2, verses 1-4.

*Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.*

I want to paint two different pictures for you. First, I want you to imagine what it was like to be a Christian the first years after Christ's resurrection. One thing is clear: things started with a bang. Just seven weeks after the resurrection, Peter preached at Pentecost, and suddenly they had a mega-church. Three thousand people. A few days later, Peter and John healed a lame man. Then there were other healings. People were joining the church daily. Some of those who believed at Pentecost headed out into the rest of the world. Some went to northern Africa. Others went to Samaria. Everywhere they went, new churches sprang up. Oh, there was opposition, too. The Jerusalem priests did what they could to stamp out the Jesus movement, but they only made it grow faster. Their opposition only made it clear that the new faith was significant. And everything they tried backfired. They locked up Peter, and he strolled out of prison untouched in the middle of the night. They sent their meanest rabbi, Saul of Tarsus, to exterminate Christians in the Syrian city of Antioch, and he joined them instead. Then that same Saul (or Paul) went out and started spreading the good news of Jesus in Turkey and Greece and Rome. Within twenty years, there were churches all around the Mediterranean. The Christians, who at first were all Jews, opened their doors to Samaritans and Gentiles, and they were living in communities of faith and hope, all expecting Christ to return at any moment, to receive them into eternal life and restore the heavens and the earth. It wasn't always an easy time, but it was definitely thrilling.

Now, a second picture. Fast forward a couple of decades from that burst of energy and growth. There are still new churches being started, but the pace has slowed a bit. The miracles haven't exactly dried up, but they aren't quite as common. Persecution has stepped up. It isn't just jealous Jews now. It's the Roman empire. Paul is arrested and God doesn't open the prison doors for him. He's executed. So is Peter. So are many, many more. In fact, there really aren't many of the original leaders left. Now when the story of Jesus is told, it's hardly ever by someone who actually knew him. It's second, third, even fourth hand. And it's being told to the children of the first believers, which is different. These young adults – having grown up with the stories of Christ – don't see the gospel as a radical new teaching. How could they? It's all they've known. Christians still expect Jesus to return any time, but it's been, you know, like forty years. They aren't exactly looking up at the sky that often. So now, when problems appear or arguments start in the churches, they can't just say, "Let Jesus sort it out when he gets here."

They have to deal with them. When questions arise over Christianity – either from within the church or from outsiders – it’s no longer enough to just point to the mighty work of the Spirit through the church. They have to have answers. For instance, who is Jesus? Was he God in disguise, not really a man? Some say so. Was he just a man that God chose out of the crowd to make into a *very* special prophet? Some say that, too. In fact, some people even leave the church over such arguments. Some Jews go back to Judaism. Some Gentiles start their own groups.

Not quite as thrilling as those first years, huh? And not as easy. I don’t mean that being a Christian was ever easy in New Testament times, but at least when every day brought a new report of a miraculous healing or deliverance from prison or hundreds of people believing at once or a new church started, it was easy to stand firm in your faith. Now – while the gospel of the Risen Christ hasn’t changed – it just takes a little more work to keep going.

This pattern shouldn’t surprise anyone, actually. The life-cycle of dramatic new growth followed by a gradual slowing down is a familiar one. New saplings grow rapidly, but if they survive the first year (and most of them don’t), they slow down. Or take relationships. Dating and courtship is a magical and all-absorbing time, but if a romance survives to become a marriage (and most don’t), then it will settle down, and it will take more effort. We see this pattern in church today, too. As in the first century, new church starts tend to grow rapidly, but the ones that survive (and, again, most don’t) only do so by settling down to the challenge of enduring the long haul. It’s not as much fun. It takes commitment and hard work.

And that takes us to the Book of Hebrews, written sometime during this second generation of the early church. *Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it*, says verse 1. Notice the phrasing there. Our author doesn’t warn people against suddenly leaving the church, against deciding all at once to abandon their faith. The danger is drifting away, like a boat that has lost its mooring and is slowly drifting out into the stream. And the author’s right. Few people ever *decide* to abandon their faith; but many drift off, then look around after a few years and realize that somehow, without noticing, they’d misplaced it. It’s as if they’d put it in a lock box for safe-keeping while they focused on other things that felt more important at the time, and when they finally got around to checking on their faith, it was a shrivelled up, anemic thing that no longer seemed relevant.

This is the danger that Hebrews warns the second generation of the church about, and here are the author’s suggestions. First, remember. Remember what drew you to the gospel at the start. Verses 3-4: *It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.* Do not forget the passion that you began with. Or, as the author of Revelation would put it, “do not lose your first love.”

But the author knows that just remembering how exciting something used to be isn’t enough. Throughout the rest of the book, he will tell people it’s time to enter a new kind of relationship with Christ, one based less on passion and more on covenant faithfulness. “Do not neglect meeting together,” he says in chapter 10. We need each other’s encouragement. And we need to work at it. Some verses from chapter 5:

*[Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . . . About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food (5:9b, 11-12)*

It's time to grow up, he says. Ask hard questions and chew on them. Study. Learn. Pray. Put in some effort. You've been coasting downhill on the good times. Now pick yourself up and start climbing. You've grown rapidly in the energy of new life. Now, if you want to survive into the next stage of life and faith, you're going to have to work at it.

Because this matters. We aren't talking about a new fad that you can adopt for a while and then put aside, like disco. Jesus, Hebrews reminds us in the passage we just read is *the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*. Or, to go back to chapter 2 for an even more striking formulation: *If the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect [this greater] salvation?*

The author of Hebrews does not mince words. Here's the gist of his encouragement to the second generation of believers. If what we say we believe is true, then it's not just true but is the most important truth in all of history. If through his death and resurrection Jesus fundamentally changed our connection to God, restoring us to relationship with our Maker, then there is nothing else that matters in comparison. If this is true, then it demands more of us than lip service, more than a casual agreement with a creed, more than a perfunctory prayer every now and then, more than a vague memory of what we learned about Jesus as children, and more than just a few drop-in visits to the community of faith when it's convenient. If you really believe that God came to earth, endured suffering, died, and then rose again – all to reclaim us to covenant – then it is the most important thing you believe. And if there's anything more important to you, I don't understand what you mean when you say you believe it.

The book of Hebrews gets even more direct later on, but I thought I'd start you out with this kinder, gentler part. It can get in your face a bit. At least it gets in mine, which is probably why I haven't preached from it much. The next few weeks in this great book may be a challenge to all of us.