

The Tragedy of Neglecting Salvation

Scripture: Hebrews 2:1–4

Code: 1604

INTRODUCTION

Hell is undoubtedly full of people who did not actively oppose Jesus Christ, but simply drifted into damnation by neglecting to respond to the gospel. Such people are in view in Hebrews 2:1-4. They are aware of the good news of salvation provided in Jesus Christ, but aren't willing to commit their lives to Him. As a result, they drift past the call of God into eternal disaster. That is why these verses are urgent.

By way of reminder, Hebrews is an epistle addressed to three different groups of Jews residing in one particular community. One group was Jewish non-Christians who didn't believe anything about the gospel. A second group was Jewish Christians who were still hanging on to the rituals of Judaism. The third group was Jewish non-Christians who were intellectually convinced about the truths of the gospel, but who had never committed their lives to Christ. The writer of Hebrews had one purpose: To show all three groups that Jesus Christ brought a New Covenant that is better than the old one. He wanted to prove to the Jews that the Old Covenant was not wrong but incomplete, for Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. To prove that the New Covenant is better, this, the writer of Hebrews discusses the important characters of the Old Covenant and shows Christ to be better than all of them. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we saw that Christ is better than everyone and everything. Then in verses 4-14 the writer dealt specifically with Christ's superiority over angels.

A. An Invitation

In the midst of his treatise on angels, the writer of Hebrews gives an invitation to his readers so that they might apply what he has been saying about Christ. All along he's been saying that Christ is the greatest one, that He alone can purge sin, for He is God. He is the creator, the exalted one, and is therefore worthy of our worship. But now he stops to give a personal invitation so that his readers and hearers might respond to what he's been saying. You might say that doctrine is punctuated by an invitation.

1. The demand for a response

The Word of God always demands a response--one must react to its message. And I add that any effective teacher must do more than just dispose of facts; he must warn, exhort, and extend an invitation.

2. The concern for a response

By the time the writer had written 14 verses, he was impassioned. He truly cared about the salvation of his hearers. He was not so egocentric that all he cared about was spewing out doctrine; he wanted

a response. He not only exalted Christ, but also cared that his hearers respond to Christ. A man may know a lot of truth and doctrine, but if he doesn't have a passionate concern for how people react to it, he's not worth a nickel as a teacher.

a) By Paul

The apostle Paul was like that. As great a theologian as he was with his masterful grasp of philosophy and logic, he was still an impassioned individual.

(1) Romans 9:1-3--After eight great chapters of treatise on the character of the gospel, Paul burst into a great display of emotion: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul had such a concern in his heart for his Jewish kinsmen to come to Christ that it ate away at him.

(2) Romans 10:1--"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." That reflects the character of a true teacher. Teaching does not include just academics, but having a deep concern with how people respond.

(3) 1 Corinthians 9:19-23--"For though I am free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law. To them that are without law, as without law (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ), that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak; I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake."

b) By Jesus

In John 5:39-40 Jesus said, "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life." Jesus also had a passionate concern that His hearers respond to His teaching.

In Hebrews 13:22 the book of Hebrews is referred to as a word of exhortation. It demands a response. And that's what the writer of Hebrews wants from the invitation that he interjects in the middle of his treatise on the superiority of Christ to angels. This invitation includes two things that all invitations must include-- an exhortation and a warning.

B. A Warning

The warning in Hebrews 2:1-4 is the first of five great warnings interjected throughout the book of Hebrews. Each one occurs in the middle of a treatise on the superiority of Christ. It's as if the writer can teach only so much before he has to confront his audience about their response. You can know all the truth there is to know about Jesus Christ and still go to hell if you never do anything about it.

1. Those included

To whom is the warning directed? To Hebrew non-Christians who are intellectually convinced about the gospel, but have never committed their life to Christ. You have probably met people like that who say, "I believe, but I'm not ready to make a commitment." They go to church and hear the Word of God. They know it's true, but they are not willing to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. They are like the man who believes a boat can hold him but never gets in.

2. Those excluded

The warning could not be to Christians because they are never in danger of neglecting salvation since they already have it. They might neglect growth and discipleship, but they could never neglect

salvation. The warning can't be directed to people who've never heard the gospel because they can't neglect what they don't know exists. The only group left is those non-Christians who are intellectually convinced of the gospel but not committed to it.

When the writer uses the words "we" and "us" in verses 1-3, is he including himself with those who were intellectually convinced? Is the author saying that he's not a Christian? No. The word "us" refers to the Jewish nationality that the author and the audience shared. We cannot build a theological case on the use of a pronoun. The author's willingness to identify himself with the readers does not mean that he is in the same spiritual condition they are. He seems to be saying, "All of us who have heard the gospel ought to accept it."

I believe the warning is directed to the intellectually convinced--those who have heard the gospel and know the facts about Jesus Christ, but are not willing to receive Christ as Savior. That's the most tragic category of people in existence.

Burning the Book

I will never forget a particular lady who came into my office and informed me that she was a prostitute. She said, "I need help." And I said, "I guess you do." She said, "Please, I'm desperate." So I presented the claims of Christ to her. Then I said, "Would you like to invite Jesus Christ into your life?" She said yes, so she prayed and evidently invited Christ into her life. I said, "Now, I want you to do something. Do you have your book with all your contacts?" She said she did. I said, "Let's light a match to it and burn it." She looked at me and said, "What do you mean?" I said, "If you want to live for Jesus Christ, and you've truly accepted His forgiveness and met Him as your Savior, then you need to prove it." She said to me, "That book is worth a lot of money. I don't want to burn it." She put it back in her purse and looked me right in the eye and said, "I guess I don't really want Jesus, do I?" Then she left.

When it came down to counting the cost, she wasn't ready. I don't know what the outcome of that poor woman has been. I do know she knows the facts and believes them, but she was not willing to make the sacrifice. What she kept wasn't worth anything compared to what she could have had in Jesus Christ.

The warning in Hebrews 2:1-4 is directed to those who know the truth, but are hanging on the edge of a decision without making it. The writer wants to give them a big shove toward Jesus Christ. And this is not just directed toward a Jewish audience. It is also fit for any man who is on the edge of a decision for Christ, but because of self-will, fear, sin, or impending persecution from family and friends, says no to Christ and continues to neglect Him. A man is a fool when he neglects to make the right decision. Why? There are three reasons: the character of Christ, the certainty of judgment, and the confirmation of God.

LESSON

I. THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST (v. 1)

"Therefore, we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip."

What does that have to do with the character of Christ? "Therefore" is the key: It refers back to Jesus Christ. The writer is saying that because of who Christ is, you ought to pay attention to the things you have heard lest you slip away.

A. Rejecting Without Cause

Based on Hebrews 1:1-14, Christ is the Son, the heir of all things, the one who made the world, the brightness of the glory of God, the exact image of His person, and the one who upholds all things by the word of His power. He purged our sins, is seated on the right hand of the majesty, is better than angels, and is chief of all. Even the angels worship Him and are His servants. He is forever and ever, anointed above all others, and the Lord of creation. What kind of a fool would reject Christ--the one who came into the world to die on a cross to forgive your sin, to pay the penalty you deserve, to show you love, to introduce you to God, and to give you blessing and joy beyond imagination? Christ's character makes rejection the most foolish act that a man could ever commit. Jesus was God in the world. To reject Jesus Christ is to reject God, which is to reject the reason for your existence. Because of the magnificence of the person of Christ, a man is a fool to reject the salvation He offers. I don't understand how people can know who Christ is and yet never commit their lives to Him. What a tragedy!

B. Drifting Without Concern

There are two key Greek words in Hebrews 2:1: prosecho, which means "to give attention to" and pararheomen, which means "to let slip."

1. The basic definitions

a) Prosecho

This word is translated "to give the more earnest heed." The writer is saying that on the basis of who Christ is, we must give attention to the things we've heard about Him.

b) Pararheomen

This word can be translated many ways. It can be used of something flowing or slipping past. It can be used of a ring slipping off a finger. It could even be used of something slipping into a wrong place. But it is most often used of something that has carelessly or thoughtlessly been allowed to slip away.

2. Their nautical significance

Prosecho

, means "to moor a ship"; pararheomen can be used of a ship that has been carelessly allowed to

drift past the harbor because the sailor forgot to attend to the steerage or chart the wind, tides, and current. Verse 1 could be translated this way: "Therefore, we must diligently anchor our lives to the things we have been taught lest the ship of life drift past the harbor of salvation and be lost forever." That is a graphic picture of what happens.

Men don't dive headlong into hell; they have more of a tendency to drift into it. Most people don't deliberately turn their backs on God; they almost imperceptibly slip past the harbor of salvation and are broken on the rocks of destruction. One writer building on Shakespeare (Julius Caesar IV.iii.209) said,

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Taken at its ebb, leads to victory

Neglected, the shores and strands of time Are strewn with the wreckage.

This is not a picture of an ignorant or unbelieving sailor, but of a careless one. So you had better take heed, unless slowly and imperceptibly you find yourself having slipped past the harbor of salvation and destroyed on the rocks.

C. Hearing Without Commitment

In Hebrews 2:1 the writer says that we need to take heed to the things we have heard. Many of the Jews had heard the gospel from apostolic missionaries, but hadn't made a personal application.

1. The exhortation of Scripture

- a) Luke 9:44--Jesus said, "Let these sayings sink down into your ears." It isn't enough to hear the words of Scripture; you need to let it get inside of you for it to make a change in your life.
- b) Proverbs 4:20-22--Solomon said, "My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh." When you hear the Word of God, make it yours. The most dangerous thing you can do is to let it drift past your ears.

2. The rejection of Scripture

The Hebrew unbelievers had heard the Word, but they hadn't made a commitment. We know they had heard the voice of God because Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "God, who at sundry times and diverse manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." They had heard the voice of God in the Old Testament, in the person of Jesus Christ, and from apostolic missionaries, but they'd done nothing about it. A fool rejects the Word of God. The ultimate tragedy is for those people who continually hear the gospel to keep slipping carelessly, almost imperceptibly, to destruction.

3. The bypassing of Scripture

Hebrews 2:1 as translated in the King James Version indicates it is the Word of God that slips. But that's not true. The Greek text indicates it is men that slip, not the Word. The Word of God never drifts; men drift from it. The harbor of salvation is Jesus Christ, and He never changes. Salvation is always available until the time a man slips past the harbor of grace. It makes me wonder how many thousands of people in hell were so close to salvation. How many thousands were close to being safely moored and anchored only to drift away forever through a failure to receive what they heard,

and in many cases, actually believed to be true? Drifting is so quiet and easy, yet so damning. All you need to do to go to hell is do nothing. I don't understand how anyone who knows the character of Jesus Christ can ever reject Him. As a Christian who lives every day with Jesus Christ and experiences Him in my life, it is the greatest mystery to me that people wouldn't rush to Jesus and want everything He has for them.

Drifting on an Ice Floe

Explorer William Edward Perry and his crew were exploring the Arctic Ocean. At one point they endeavored to move further north, so they charted their location by the stars and began a difficult and treacherous march north. They walked hour upon hour, and finally, totally exhausted, they stopped. They took their bearings and discovered that they were farther south than they were when they started! They then realized that they had been walking on an ice floe that was travelling south faster than they were walking north. I wonder how many people think their good deeds, their merits, and their religiosity is taking them to God when in fact they're on an ice floe taking them away from God faster than their own efforts are taking them any closer. They will wake one day to find, like William Perry's crew did, that they're in the midst of a disaster.

Don't be satisfied with religious feelings. Don't be satisfied with coming to church. Don't be satisfied with being married to a Christian spouse. Don't be satisfied with church activity. You'll be drifting into a Christless hell unless you've made a personal commitment to Him. A man is a fool to reject salvation.

II. THE CERTAINTY OF JUDGMENT (vv. 2-3a)

"For if the word spoken by angels [the Old Covenant] was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation"

If no one got away with breaking the covenant brought by angels, no one will get away with breaking the covenant brought by our Lord.

A. The Free Choice

The Holy Spirit is arguing from the lesser to the greater with the two testaments in mind. The one testament was the revelation of the law that came by angels. Any breach of that law, or any disobedience to it, was followed by severe and just punishment. The other revelation came through Christ. Since it came through a greater mediator, the Son of God, it is a greater covenant and consequently brings about equal or greater punishment. A man is a fool to think he can escape from the punishment of the new and greater covenant if no man ever escaped the punishment of the old. There are people who believe that God is a God of love and grace, yet not of justice. If you do not receive Jesus Christ, God's justice can only condemn you. The choice is yours.

Verse 2 says, "Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward." The word "every" indicates there was no escape from the law of the Old Covenant. Likewise, there is no escape from the law of the New Covenant. You don't have to keep a bunch of laws in the New Covenant; you only have to keep one--to believe in Jesus Christ and receive Him as your Lord. That is what secures to you the New Covenant and freedom from punishment. In Romans 8:1 Paul said, "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus." There is no judgment for anyone who is in Christ. There's only one law in the New Covenant--the necessity of receiving Jesus Christ by faith. If a man couldn't neglect the revelation that came through angels, how could he neglect the revelation that came through the Lord Himself?

B. The Fulfilled Condition

Hebrews 2:2 says, "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast." The word "if" represents what is known in Greek as a fulfilled condition. In other words, it doesn't mean "maybe"; it means "absolutely." The verse could be translated, "Since the word spoken by angels was steadfast."

1. The plan for angels

a) Bringing forth a spoken law

Notice that verse 2 says, "The word spoken by angels." Why are the Old Testament commandments connected with the angels? Because the angels were instrumental in bringing the Ten Commandments to Israel.

(1) Psalm 68:17--"The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place." Where did Moses get the law? On Mount Sinai. Angels were also at Sinai.

(2) Deuteronomy 33:2--Moses said, "The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints [angels]. From his right hand went a fiery law for them." That indicates angels were involved in the bringing of the law.

(3) Acts 7:38--In referring to Moses, Stephen said, "This is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him in Mount Sinai." When Moses was in Sinai, an angel spoke to him. Verse 53 says he "received the law by the disposition of angels."

Angels were at Sinai. They were very instrumental in the bringing of the law.

b) Bringing forth a steadfast law

The law the angels spoke, primarily the Ten Commandments, was steadfast. That means if the law was broken, the law broke the lawbreaker. There wasn't any out. If a person committed adultery, he was stoned. If a person worshiped false gods and blasphemed God, he was stoned. The law was inviolable; punishment for breaking it was certain.

2. The punishment for sin

Verse 2 says, "Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward." That means the law punished every sin.

a) The definition of sin

There are two kinds of sin:

(1) "transgression"

The Greek word parabasis means "to step across a line." That's a willful act of sin--an overt sin of commission, a purposeful sin.

(2) "disobedience"

The Greek word for disobedience here (parakoe) refers to imperfect hearing. This kind of sin is a deliberate shutting of the ears to the commands, warnings, and invitations of God. It is a sin of neglect or omission. It is a sin of doing nothing when you should do something.

There are only two kinds of sin, and they involve what you do and what you don't do. Every sin was covered by the law. Both types of sin were breaches of Old Testament law and they received a just punishment.

b) The details of punishment

(1) Its severity

The punishments in Old Testament days were severe.

(a) Leviticus 24:14-16--"Bring forth him who hath cursed outside the camp; and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him. And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin. And he who blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him; as well the sojourner as he who is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the Lord, shall be put to death." Now that's a severe law. God wanted to make sure Israel's purity was maintained by dealing immediately with all false prophets and blasphemers.

(b) Numbers 15:30-36--"The soul that doeth anything presumptuously, whether he is born in the land, or a sojourner, the same reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the Lord, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him. And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man who gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they who found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in prison, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp. And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses." Picking up sticks on the Sabbath may seem to be a trivial thing to warrant a stoning, but the principle is the issue: He was defying the law of God, and the punishment for breaking the law was inviolable.

(c) Numbers 25:1-9--"Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baal-peor; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And the Lord said unto Moses, Take all the heads of the people, and hang them up before the Lord against the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from Israel. And Moses said unto the judges of Israel, Slay ye every one his men that were joined unto Baal-peor. And, behold, one of the children of Israel came and brought unto his brethren a Midianitish woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel who were weeping before the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from among the congregation, and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her abdomen. So the plague was stayed from the children of Israel. And those that died in the plague were twenty and four thousand." God had to do that to maintain purity in Israel. He defended them and kept them from false gods. The ones who were slain were not of God, but of Satan. And God dealt strictly with them.

(d) Deuteronomy 17:2-7--"If there be found among you, within any of thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee, man or woman who hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God, in transgressing his covenant, and hath gone and served other gods, and worshiped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, and it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and inquired diligently, and, behold, it is true, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought in Israel; then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, who hath

committed that wicked thing, unto thy gates, even that man or that woman, and shalt stone them with stones, till they die. At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death. The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you." Why did God do all that? Verse 13 says so that "all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously." If the consequence is made strict enough, the people will obey.

(e) Deuteronomy 27:26--"Cursed be he who confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen."

(f) Jude 5--"I will, therefore, put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not."

If unbelief was severely punished under the Old Covenant, you can be sure it will be even more severe under the New Covenant. That's the point of Hebrews 2:2-3: "If the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?"

(2) Its justice

People like to accuse God of not being just. But according to verse 2, God is just. He has never done anything unjust in His existence. Every punishment was a deterrent to the sin that He wanted to stop. He punished only those who had determined to defy Him. So He removed them for the sake of those who were pure and holy and wanted to live for Him.

(a) The principle

God's judgment on Israel was severe because they knew better. And that leads us to an important principle: Punishment is always related to light. The more light you have, the more severe your punishment will be.

i) Matthew 11:20-24--"Then began he [Jesus] to upbraid the cities in which most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hades; for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee." The more you know, the greater the punishment. Sodom and Gomorrah, and Tyre and Sidon were punished, but in no way like Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin will be punished. They had known not only the truths of the Old Testament, but the revelation of God's Messiah as well.

ii) Mark 12:38-40--Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the market places, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost places at feasts; who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers; these shall receive greater condemnation." Did you know that there are degrees of punishment in hell? And the hottest hell belongs to those who rejected the most light.

iii) Luke 12:47-48--Jesus said, "And that servant, who knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."

Since the law brought by angels had stern and severe judgment, how much more severe will judgment be on those who not only have the old law but also the New Covenant in Christ, yet still willfully reject it! That truth is pointed out clearly and explicitly in Hebrews 10:28-29: "He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses; of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God,

and hath counted the blood of the covenant, with which he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" If you think punishment was bad under Moses' law, it will be that much worse for one who knows the truth of Jesus Christ, makes a mental assent to it, and then treads the blood of Jesus Christ under his feet.

(b) The pit

The man who knows the gospel, who has intellectually understood it and believed it, yet drifts away, will experience the severest punishment of all. Many people in hell are experiencing it now, for hell is a real place. The New Testament calls it a place of everlasting fire (Matt. 25:41) where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:43-44). It's called a lake of fire that burns with brimstone (Rev. 19:20). It's called a bottomless pit (Rev. 9:11). It is called black darkness (Jude 13). It's called outer darkness, where there is continual weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22:13). How can a man escape judgment if he rejects the New Covenant of Christ? He can't. There is no way to escape if we neglect such a great salvation. Romans 2:3 says, "And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them who do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?"

III. THE CONFIRMATION OF GOD (vv. 3-4)

A. Confirmed by the Preacher of the Gospel (v. 3a)

"How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord"

The word for "Lord" in the Septuagint is the translation of the word "Jehovah." This is another indication that Jesus is God. He is the Jehovah God of the Old Testament. Verse 3 says that the gospel was first spoken by the Lord. Christ was the first preacher of the gospel of repentance. Luke 4:16-21 says, "He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet, Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down.... And he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." The people became upset because He was claiming to be the Messiah. Jesus was the first preacher of the gospel.

B. Confirmed by the Hearers of the Gospel (v. 3b)

"And was confirmed unto us by them that heard him."

The believing Jews who were the object of this letter didn't hear the gospel from Christ Himself; they heard it from apostolic missionaries. The Lord preached it first, but it was passed on by those who heard Him. These Jews were second generation in terms of hearing the message.

C. Confirmed by the Works of the Gospel (v. 4)

"God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with diverse miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will."

1. The people

a) Christ

When Jesus preached the gospel, He did miracles that made what He said believable. He said, "Though ye believe not me, believe the works" (John 10:38). Jesus claimed to be from God, and then made it obvious that He was really from God. Nicodemus came to Him by night and said, "No man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:2). Jesus confirmed His ministry by His own miracles. And Peter confirmed that on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:22: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs."

b) Apostles and prophets

The same things Peter talked about on the day of Pentecost were the same confirming signs given to the second generation preachers--the apostles. Many of their listeners no doubt said, "Why should we believe them? There have always been many false teachers around. How can we know they're for real?" So God gave His messengers the ability to do the same things Jesus had done--signs, wonders, and miracles. Jesus Himself told His own disciples, "Greater works than these shall [ye] do, because I go unto my Father" (John 14:12). The apostles performed astounding miracles, such as raising of the dead and healing of people.

If men were to argue that the gospel of Jesus Christ couldn't possibly come from the mouths of the apostles, then they were arguing in spite of the confirmation from God. What the apostles said was not their own opinion; it was divine truth substantiated by signs, wonders, and miracles. Read chapters five through nineteen of Acts and you will see the many miracles that attended the ministry of these men. God was saying, "Believe them. They're from Me, and it's proven by their ability to do miracles."

2. The works

The words "signs, wonders, and miracles" are synonyms. They each refer to all the supernatural things the apostles did. Yet they confirmed the Word not only with such things, but also with gifts of the Holy Spirit.

a) Their source

Hebrews 2:4 says that the gifts of the Spirit were done "according to his own will." That phrase seems to be put there to keep people from being confused about the source of certain gifts. In a conversation I had with Dr. Earl Radmacher, the president of Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, he told me he received a pamphlet in the mail that gave steps for obtaining the Holy Spirit. Supposedly, if you said "Praise the Lord," and "Hallelujah" three times faster than normal for a period of ten minutes, you would lapse into a strange language and receive the Holy Spirit. That's about as ridiculous as anything you'll ever hear. But the apostles performed signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit given to them by the will of God.

b) Their significance

There are many gifts of the Holy Spirit--Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 list all the gifts. But the gifts referred to in Hebrews 2:4 were miraculous gifts for the sake of confirmation.

(1) Their supernatural power

(a) 2 Corinthians 12:12--Paul said, "Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds."

(b) Romans 15:19--Paul said, "Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God,

so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." Paul was an apostle and he had the ability to do miracles.

(c) Acts 14:3--Luke said, "A long time, therefore, abode they [Paul and Barnabas] speaking boldly in the Lord, who gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands."

(d) Acts 15:32--Luke said, "And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them." How did they confirm their words? With signs, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

(2) Their special purpose

(a) The confirmation

What were the gifts of the Spirit? I believe there were four: healing, miracles, tongues (languages), and interpretation of tongues. They were the four special confirming gifts used to prove to people, by supernatural acts, that the apostles and prophets spoke from God.

(b) The cessation

I also believe that those gifts all ceased with the apostolic era. There is no need for them to exist today because there is no need to confirm the Word. If someone says, "Thus saith the Lord," all you need to do is match up what he says with God's Word. Benjamin Warfield, the great Bible scholar, said, "These miraculous gifts were part of the credentials of the apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church. Their function thus confined them distinctively in the apostolic church, and they necessarily passed away with it."

First Corinthians 14:22 says, "Tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not." Those gifts never had any importance for believers; they served as confirmation to unbelievers that the apostles and prophets spoke for God. When the Word was established, such miracles ceased.

There are three reasons that a man is a fool to neglect salvation: the character of Christ, the certainty of judgment, and the confirmation of God. God has attested to the gospel with signs, wonders, miracles, gifts, and now in the miracle of His written Word. Let it not be said of you that you neglected Jesus Christ. History tells us that hours of neglect cost Napoleon Waterloo. And neglecting Christ's salvation will cost you eternal blessing and joy, and bring you damnation. Don't be so foolish that you drift past God's grace.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What does the writer of Hebrews do in the midst of his @discussion of angels? Why?
2. What must any effective teacher do?
3. Whom did the writer of Hebrews have in mind when he gave the warning in Hebrews 2:1-4?
4. Who is a person rejecting when he rejects Jesus Christ?
5. What are the two key Greek words in Hebrews 2:1? Define them both. Explain their significance.
6. Ultimately, how do most men wind up in hell? Do they deliberately choose to go there, or do they drift into it? Explain.

7. What is the one law in the New Testament?
8. Explain how the angels were instrumental in bringing the Old Testament to Israel.
9. What are the two kinds of sin? Define each one.
10. Describe the severity of punishments in Old Testament days.
11. What principle can be gleaned from God's severe punishment of Israel? Give some verses that show this principle in action.
12. What are some of the biblical names for hell?
13. Who was the first preacher of the gospel?
14. How did God confirm the preaching of the apostles and prophets (Heb. 2:4)?
15. What do the words "signs, wonders, and miracles" in Hebrews 2:4 refer to?
16. What were the gifts of the Spirit referred to in Hebrews 2:4? What was their special purpose?

Pondering the Principles

1. When you present the gospel to an unbeliever, or teach or share God's Word to a believer, is your primary concern to generate a response from your listener? If it isn't, it should be. Look up the following verses regarding the apostle Paul's commitment to share the gospel with others: Romans 9:1-3, 10:1; and 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, 9:19-23, 10:33. Perhaps you could apply something you have learned from Paul's example. Make the commitment to do so.
2. First Corinthians 11:28 says that a person should examine himself before he participates in communion. Examining ourselves is something we should practice more than we do. Take a few minutes to examine yourself in terms of your own salvation. Are you trying to live the Christian life in your own power--working hard to get closer to God while you are actually slipping past the harbor of salvation? Make sure that you have made a true commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord in your life. If you're sure you have, yet you feel as if you are being frustrated in your efforts to live the Christian life, ask God to give you insight. Approach your pastor or a Christian friend to help you solidify your faith in Christ.
3. Review the two definitions of sin on page 9. Write those definitions somewhere in your Bible. Look carefully at those definitions and ask God to reveal the sins in your life that correspond to each definition. Learn to easily identify those sins that fall in the area of neglect or omission. It is usually easy for us to remember when we have defied God, but it is not so easy for us to be sensitive to times when we have failed to do something we should have.

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