



HEEDING THE WARNINGS OF HEBREWS

First Warning: Don't Drift From The Word!

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Traditionally in Australia, the Summer holidays see families making a bee-line for the beach. Sun, sand and surf make for a fabulous time of rapturous family fun, recreation and relaxation.

As a young lad from the bush, I remember going with my family and seeing the sea for the first time. It was awesome! I also vividly recall reading the 'WARNING' signs as I walked across the sand to the rolling waves and the huge swells. They drew me with their magnetic-like charm. "What in the world are 'dangerous rips'?" I asked. "Swim between the flags", my caring and loving parents replied, "There's a dangerous under-tow out there! You can't see it but you'll be caught in it and drift, if you're not careful! Always keep looking to us here, under the sun-shade on the shore. We're watching you all the time!"

That was good advice, parentally, for I am still alive to share the truth of their safety advice to this adventurous country boy. It is also good advice, spiritually. That's why the writer to the Hebrews – whether Paul or not⁽¹⁾ – admonished his Jewish readership in five 'Warning Passages'⁽²⁾ in his book to Hebrew believers⁽³⁾ probably a few years before the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70⁽⁴⁾.

In a magnificent presentation of Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah, the author portrayed Him as the One who is "better". His concern was to show the SUPERIORITY of Jesus in everything and over all. Specifically, Jesus is "better" than the Prophets (1:1-4); "better" than the Angels (1:5-14); "better" than Moses (3:1-6); "better" than Aaron (5:1-4ff) and therefore brings all believers a "better" hope (7:19) because He is the Mediator of a "better" covenant (8:6) which was established on "better" promises (8:6ff).

Jesus, the Messiah, is God's 'Last Word' to man – **He is the par excellence vehicle of divine revelation (1:1-4)**. Therefore, LISTEN TO HIM! He is coming to establish His Kingdom (12:25-29) and believers should serve Him "acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (12:28). That begs the question though: IS ANYBODY LISTENING? God has spoken consummately in Jesus the Messiah. What did He say (and what is He saying in His Word today) on these matters? By heeding His Word, we avoid the ever-present danger of spiritually "drifting"!



First Warning DON'T DRIFT FROM THE WORD! (2:1-4)

With a consistent literary pattern, the author first presented a solid Biblical and theological foundation and followed it up with a practical exhortation to his readership in a characteristically exhortatory 'warning' style. The first of five such "teaching plus warning" sections in Hebrews begins after his introductory prologue (1:1-4) with a gripping presentation as to how and why Jesus is "better" than the Angels (1:5-14). He then applies this truth in terms of the reason why believers should not neglect their 'salvation-hope'.

Succinctly stated, we may say that in 2:1-4, he warned believers that: **"Neglect of their salvation-hope is perilous indeed!"** He followed this with another simple truth: "In His humanity, Jesus – the Heir of all things – has become fully suited to the needs of His fellow-heirs" (2:5-18).

Notice the express words of the text in 2:1-4: **"Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away ..."** (2:1, NKJV). What have they "heard" in chapter one? What exactly are the sinister undertow currents and the dangerous, subtle rips that could cause believers to lose their "point of reference" and "drift away"? Had they lost (or are they in the process of losing) their life-saving focus on the Lord Jesus Christ?

For these first century Jewish believers who had stepped out of Judaism and come to faith in the Messiah, persecution from their religious countrymen (10:32-34; cf. 12:4, 9) and adverse personal circumstances (10:36) were pressuring them to reverse their course and return to their former ritual ways at the Temple (cf. chapters 8 and 9; 13:10-13). The answer to this temptation of spiritual defection (3:12-13) is to "go on to perfection" (6:1). There is much more to be gained "in Christ" than to be lost in Judaism (which in so many ways foreshadowed Him). By God's grace, pressing on and trusting Him produces tested faith (chapters 11), self discipline (chapter 12) and a visible love seen in good works (chapter 13). No wonder the author emphasized these things in what may be considered as the fundamental, key statement of his book:

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." (Heb. 10:23)

First, then, these believers have been reminded that **Jesus is God's LAST Word to man (1:1-4)**. This 'Son' has been "appointed heir of all things". That points to His ultimate sovereign rule over everything and everyone, in future time. By implication this raises the issue of "revelation": *Does God still speak today?* He can, for He is ever the miracle-maker, the wonder-working God who can do whatever He wills (Eph. 1:11). There are no restrictions on this Sovereign Lord, except those He may choose to impose upon Himself.



The text teaches us that God has spoken – in His Incarnate Word, to whom the inscripturated Word gives testimony (Jn. 5:39). Guidance is given to believers through God's Word, by His Holy Spirit as they pray and seek His face (Rom. 8:14, 26; Gal. 5:16, 25; Ps. 32:8). The late President of Dallas Theological Seminary, John F. Walvoord, was right when he said: "There is an experience for the believer beyond Scripture, but never contrary to Scripture!" Never drift from that principle!

Secondly, it was "through Him" – the Son – that "all the worlds were made" (1:2b). That pointed to His works in creation in the distant past time.

Thirdly, He is "the effulgence⁽⁵⁾ of His glory" and "the express image⁽⁶⁾ of His person⁽⁷⁾". These descriptions point to His eternity and deity.

Fourthly, He is "upholding all things by the word of His power"⁽⁸⁾ (1:3c). The word used here in the original language for "upholding" (Greek: *phero*) is a present participle. The connotation therefore is *not* of the Lord doing what the Greek mythical god Atlas is said to have done – holding up the world on his shoulders – but rather that of Jesus presently *bearing* the universe in a sovereign, dynamic, consistent, on-going way to achieve His divine, consummating purposes! He spoke in the past and it (creation) was done (Ps. 33:6). Now in the present, He is supernaturally bearing that same creation of His making "by the (spoken)

word (Greek: *rhemati*) of His power". How awesome is this God of all believers!

Fifthly, when Jesus had by Himself "purged our sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High" (1:3d). The author here underscored the redemptive work of Jesus on the Cross. He cleansed our sins at Calvary through His atoning, substitutionary, death. This act of salvation is depicted here as being completed in the (relatively) immediate past time. Moreover, His being seated at God's right hand also connotes a completed, finished act in the (relatively) immediate past time.

In this divine salvific process, Jesus is depicted as "becoming so much better than the angels" (1:4a) because He has "by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they" (1:4b). The point being made is that this "King-Son", by His resurrection, has been raised to an exalted position of authority, therein being given a name that is "better" than the Angels. As to what that "name" is, we are not told explicitly here, but the text and the wider context implies here that it is the holy, ("unutterable" for Orthodox Jewry) name of God: "YHWH" (LORD).

The Jewish readership would have immediately recalled Exodus 6:2-3 in this regard: "And God spoke to Moses and said to him: 'I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them.'" Paul, elsewhere, makes the bold claim that, "JESUS IS LORD". YHWH (Jehovah) is LORD in the Old Testament becomes JESUS is LORD in the New Testament! He is Deity – Immanuel, God with us (Is. 7:14). Ultimately every knee will bow before Him in acknowledgment as King of kings and Lord of lords! (Phil 2:9-11; Rev. 19:16).

Secondly, **to God's Kingly-Son – not the Angels – belongs a triumphant, eternal reign**. This is essentially what is shared with the Hebrew believers in 1:5-14.

With carefully chosen "inclusio" questions, the author asked: "For to which of the angels did He ever say ...? (1:5, 13). Sandwiched between these two "book end" questions, he cited a series of seven quotations from the Septuagint Greek translation⁽⁹⁾ of the Hebrew Scriptures (the TeNaCh for the Jews; the Old Testament for Christians) to highlight just how SUPERIOR Jesus is to angels.

But why would he contrast Jesus with the angels? In Judaism, and more particularly in the giving of the Law (Torah), angels were of paramount importance. In Deuteronomy

33:2, Psalm 68:17, Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19, we read that the angels were present when God gave the Law to Moses on the holy mountain, Sinai. In fact, they were the intermediaries of divine revelation, according to Jewish tradition. The connection here for our author is at once apparent: God gave the Law and revealed Himself to His people via the angels at the mountain of God; He has now revealed Himself finally in His King-Son who is SUPERIOR to the angels!

Time and space does not permit the present writer to go into all the details and significance of this catena of Old Testament verses, 5 through 13, but there is need in this present study to direct attention to the following facts:

- The first quote is a combination of the Messianic Psalm 2 (verse 7) where reference is made to the *Messiah being the One who through resurrection, is designated "Son"*. In that context, the nations rage and are set against Him, but the Psalmist entreats them to be wise and "kiss the Son, lest He be angry ..." for all who put their trust in Him "will be blessed" (2:12). The other part of the quotation (2 Sam. 7:14) is immediately significant. It is another reference to the "Son of David" (Messiah) being called "a Son". That God is said to have a "Son" in the Jewish Scriptures was and is anathema to monotheistic, Orthodox Jews. The same is true of the Muslim faith, for on the Dome of the Rock on the Temple mount, there is a strong statement in Arabic: "God has no son"!



But the fact is explicitly stated here in Hebrews 1:5 and implicitly stated in other passages such as Isaiah 48:16 and Proverbs 31:4, to cite just two of the many references that implicitly reveal that this is so. The Scriptures teach that God exists in a Tri-unity of three Persons, yet one in essence or being – not three gods, or three

expressions (modes) of One God. Jesus is God, one with the Father (Jn. 10:30).

- The second thing to note here is that this “Son” will have an eternal throne and an everlasting kingdom (Hebrews 1:8-9). Moreover, God has ordained that He, the Messiah, will have an “inheritance” – the whole, redeemed, renewed universe (1:8-12) – in which “(His) companions (Greek: metochoi, co-sharers, companions, partners, partakers) will also share because they, too, have been “anointed with the oil of gladness” (1:9). This same word and connotation will occur again in (1:14; 3:1, 14; 6:4 and 12:8). How interesting and illuminating! *Believers will share His inheritance in His coming Kingdom* (See 12:25-29).

No wonder the author told his readers (and all of us who are believers) that we “must give more earnest heed to the things we have heard, LEST WE DRIFT AWAY! It is possible for anyone who trusts Christ for salvation to no longer listen or have one’s spiritual hearing impaired with other things that clog up the hearing channels, and “drift”!

But the author wasn’t finished. In verse two he reminded his readership that if that WORD spoken through the angels proved steadfast and every transgression and disobedience “received a just reward” (2:2), “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation*” (2:3).

What does this tell us, as we pay particular heed to the immediate context of the passage?

1. *Observe the word “neglect” here; it is NOT the word “reject”!* The term is best translated “having neglected” with the idea of “abandoning something or someone and leaving it/them in the lurch” and moving on to something else. To lose one’s focus is to neglect the object of one’s attention. Here, that focus is on the SUPERIOR “Christ” – The Messiah! Believers, beware! The danger of drifting is ever present! Let us all make sure we “go on to maturity” in Christ (Cf. 6:1ff) by “looking away unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (12:2).
2. *We must pay close attention to the term “salvation” – as used by our author – here, and throughout Hebrews.* It is the word “soteria” in the original language, and its basic meaning in Greek (just as its synonymous term in Hebrew), is “deliverance” or “being saved safely by being delivered”. Read carefully all the

occurrences of this word in Hebrews and you will observe something fundamentally amazing: IT ALWAYS REFERS TO **THE FUTURE ASPECT** OF “SALVATION” OR “DELIVERANCE”. Check out Hebrews 1:14, 2:3, 10; 5:9, 6:9 and 9:28. (In 11:7, there is an historic reference to Noah and the “saving” of his household.)

3. By definition, then, we may say that the author of Hebrews wanted believers to understand that **SALVATION** (to his thinking and purpose) is **“that ultimate deliverance from conflict in which they will share Messiah’s glorious reign in His kingdom and then forever!”**
4. No wonder believers should not neglect their salvation-hope, for it is “so great A SALVATION”! To put it another way: **“Neglect of our salvation-hope is perilous indeed!”** Why? First, since our author teaches the eternal security of the



believer in one of the most telling passages on this subject in the whole New Testament (6:13-20), *every born again believer will share their inheritance in the Kingdom with their Lord and King.* But, while salvation is a free gift of grace, “works” – which He has “prepared beforehand that (they) should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10, esp. verse 10) – will be rewarded according to one’s faithfulness here on earth (1 Cor. 3:10-16; 2 Cor. 5:9-10;⁽¹⁰⁾ So it is possible to be saved for all eternity, but enter into the Kingdom devoid of what could have been gained to cast at His feet in humble adoration, thankfulness and praise. That is a sobering thought! Ponder prayerfully again the author’s convicting statement: **“Neglect of our salvation-hope is perilous indeed!”**

5. This gospel message of “salvation” (with its past, present and future aspects)⁽¹¹⁾ – the last being emphasized in Hebrews – is an

authentic message. It was spoken of “at the first” by the Lord Himself (2:3a). It was (and is) an *authenticated* message, for the author said that “it was confirmed to us by those who heard Him” (2:3b). Eyewitnesses bore testimony to the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:5-9ff). Now a second generation of “earwitnesses” attested to the fact that His message was true, for God bore witness by authenticating both the message and the messengers with “signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will” (2:4b). It would seem to be implied in these verses that the “signs and wonders” had finished at the time the author wrote Hebrews. Attention is drawn to the past tense used in his statement.

Taking all these factors into account, could there be a more strongly stated case to exhortingly⁽¹²⁾ warn these Hebrew believers against reverting to Judaism? They were beginning to drift, spiritually. The pressures and taunts of their unsaved compatriots, the trauma of having their goods and chattels plundered and confiscated, the subtle, ‘Siren calls’ of taking the easy road and “forsaking the assembling of themselves together” for edification (Cf. 11:24-25) rather than running the race with “patience and endurance” with Christ (Cf. 12:1-3ff) were taking their toll. They were beginning to drift. What was needed to counter-act this spiritual defection? *The danger of drifting must be avoided by a persevering progress to spiritual completion!* (Cf. 5:11 to 6:20, esp. 6:1ff). Just how that is to be done will be the topic of our next three articles.

Conclusion

Lest we think these dangers remained with the believers of the sixth and seventh decades of the first century A.D., let us be reminded that no believer is exempt from being caught in the undertow currents and fast-running rips that slowly but surely (and sometimes all too quickly!) catch us off-guard. It takes just little distractions for us to lose focus on Israel’s Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Demas did (2 Tim 4:10). So did Hymenaeus and Alexander when they “suffered shipwreck” concerning the faith (1 Tim. 1:19-20). Just over two decades later, some believers in the church at Sardis forgot to “hold fast and repent” of their dead Orthodoxy (Cf. Rev.3:1-6). They ‘drifted’ and didn’t know it!

And what might we say of spiritual defectors of the modern day church? They “did run well”

(like the Galatian believers), but somehow, sometime, someone or something “hindered them” and they stumbled from the race (Gal. 3:1-9ff; Cf. Heb 12:1-2ff).

There is a three-fold lesson for us all here:

First, let us make sure that we heed this primary warning from Hebrews: There is always a danger of drifting, spiritually!

Secondly, it matters not if one is Hebrew or Gentile, there is only one way to experience salvation. It is in Jesus the Messiah. God has sent His Son to save all who believe in Him. That way is the way of repentance and faith. There is salvation in no other Name. But having come to find eternal life in Him, it is possible to lose one’s focus and drift. If that has occurred, the command implied in Hebrews 2:1-4 is clear: repent and come back to Him now! He alone is the One who is “better”!

Thirdly, let us all humbly acknowledge Paul’s injunction in 1 Corinthians 10:12 – “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” A believer is saved for all eternity, but it is sadly possible for him to ‘lose his rewards’ as he enters his “inheritance” with Christ and shares with Him in the Kingdom! Don’t drift from the Word or let anyone “take your crown”! (Rev. 3:11)



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ENDNOTES

1. Based on the *Textus Receptus* manuscripts, traditionally the author of Hebrews is said to be Paul. There is internal evidence of many similarities to Paul’s writings. “Our brother Timothy” is mentioned in 13:23 and we know he was a close companion of this apostle to the Gentiles. However, down through the centuries, the authorship of the book has continued to be debated. Luther, for example suggested Apollos as the author. More recently, Zane Hodges proposed Barnabas, Paul’s missionary colleague. As one of the Early Church Fathers expressed it: “God alone knows who wrote Hebrews.” Whoever wrote the book, however, fades into relative insignificance when one engages in the eternal truths of the sacred text!
2. The five “warning” passages are found in Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:6 through 4:11; 5:11 through 6:20; 10:26-39 and chapter 12, especially verses 14 through 29.
3. While this aspect is also debated, when the following evidence is considered, it becomes clear that the book of Hebrews is addressed to Hebrew believers: (1) The author included himself in the warning passages as he identified himself with those so addressed. For example, “how shall **we** escape ...” (2:3, emphasis added). He is thus talking of things spiritual, not ethnological. (2) The overall tenor of all the warning passages best fits this understanding. As we shall go on to show, this is particularly applicable in chapter 6. (3) In 12:25-29, the writer speaks of his readership as those who are “receiving a kingdom” (verse 28) – a nonsense if thought to be referring to unbelievers. (4) The essence of the exhortation in chapter 12 is “to keep seeing the invisible”. That is, as the readership have been urged to pursue a life of “faith”, this principle of “pleasing God” (11:6) is elaborated throughout the following chapter. That believers are in view is at once apparent. (5) In 13:18, the writer says: “Pray for us”. If this is addressed to unbelievers, it is the only reference in the New Testament where unbelievers are asked to pray for believers!
4. It is obvious as one reads through Hebrews that the Second Temple was still standing at the time. The readership could see it; they had access to it; the sacrificial rituals were obviously in operation. Chapters 8 and 9 attest to these facts. On balance, it seems that a date of A.D. 67 or 68 best fits the evidence.
5. Greek: *apaugasma*, ‘effulgence’, ‘radiant outshining’. The term is used only here in the New Testament).
6. Greek: *character*, ‘exact image of’. Jesus is exactly like God, for He is Deity – God incarnate.
7. Greek: *hupostaseos*, ‘substance’, ‘essence’, ‘being’.
8. Greek: *dunameos*, ‘evident power, strength’. The point is that of Jesus’ dynamic power, and that associated with His ‘word’ (Greek: *rhemati*).
9. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (which Christians call the ‘Old Testament’) is called the Septuagint and usually designated by the Latin numerals LXX (indicating 70). Jewish tradition espouses that there were 72 Jewish translators who were placed in 72 separate rooms and over 72 days each wrote an identical translation of the Hebrew Scriptures from memory. The translation was effected mainly in the second century B.C.E (Before the Common Era), as Jewish friends would say. The translation was done for Greek-speaking Jewish communities in Egypt, principally in Alexandria, Egypt. In the book of Hebrews, the LXX is quoted more times than in any other part of the New Testament.
10. Cf. the five “crowns” mentioned in Scripture: (i) The Crown of Mastery over the Body (1 Cor. 9:27) in Christian service; (ii) The Soul Winner’s Crown (1 Thess. 2:19); (iii) The Crown of Life, in a context of testing and temptation (Js. 1:12); (iv) The Crown of Righteousness, for all who have vigilantly looked for the Lord and loved His appearing (2 Tim.4:8) and the Shepherd’s Crown (1 Pet. 5:4).
11. These three aspects of salvation are taught in the New Testament. To put it in simple terms, we may say that (1) Believers *have been saved* from the PENALTY of sin; they *are being saved* from the POWER of sin; they will be saved from the PRESENCE of sin. In Hebrews, it is this latter nuance of “salvation” that is consistently emphasized, as is seen by the references to “salvation” in 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9 and 9:28.
12. Note 13:22 in this regard. The book is expressly intended to be exhortatory. It is with this definitive nuance that the five “warning passages” of Hebrews should be understood. Hence, in this article, the writer has deliberately used the term “Exhortatory Warning” #1 – Don’t Drift From God’s Word!

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