

## *At Our Own Peril, Part I*

Hebrews 2:1-4

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It is well. It is well with my soul. The Lord speaks to us a needed word at the right time and in the right place. May the Lord's Word come to us this morning, and may we receive it, and may we be able to say, "It is well with my soul." Hear now God's Word. The passage on which I will preach this morning is drawn from Hebrews 2:1-4.

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

[ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Our Father from heaven, through the matchless name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, may your word thunder from your throne through the weakness of this vessel for the building up of your people. Call us again to yourself. Renew us again by your power. Feed us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So just as a warning, I'm recognizing the time is 11:15. We're also going to celebrate the Lord's Supper. So I'm going to ask—I may change a lot of this and come back to it next week, if that's okay with you. Because I have a lot I want to say. But I'll make it brief as I can.

But this word, as I was preparing for it, did indeed thunder from heaven and rattle my own soul. And I was praying, "Lord, how and what would you have me say regarding this word?" Because after the preacher of Hebrews has spent the entire first chapter proclaiming the beauty and the excellences, the glory of Jesus Christ, he now comes to the reason for why he is writing to them and preaching to them. And as I said at the beginning of the series, it serves as the application undertone to the entire letter. And so he applies it to us. And he then gives us an imperative. And he reminds us of the provision. And in recognizing that provision, we are to receive it. So working together, you will hear the warning, the imperative, and maybe this week the provision. We'll see.

So together, let's look at the warning. When he says in verse one, "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away." The warning that he gives, as I've mentioned before, is the problem of drifting. Now, the way in which we can understand this is in two ways—or, in ways in which we can put it in context of the ones to whom he is speaking, but also in understanding it for ourselves.

So I want you to understand this morning this idea of drifting in several ways. First, to understand at the root of what he is talking about is spiritual apathy. And the second part of the warning is what keeps us, then, from being made aware of the spiritual apathy? Why, then, do we not act? And then thirdly, he gives us this comparison that we must draw on. So let's look. So this idea of the warning is first expressed—this idea of drifting really is found in a really old word, which means apathy. Or in the Latin it is *acedia*. Now, Pastor Kevin DeYoung writes about this in his book *Crazy Busy*, a mercifully short book about a really big problem: being crazy busy. He says this about apathy. He says:

*Acedia* is an old word roughly equivalent to “sloth” or “listlessness.” It is not a synonym for leisure, or even laziness. *Acedia* suggests indifference and spiritual forgetfulness. It’s like the dark night of the soul, but more blah, more vanilla, less interesting. As Richard John Neuhaus explains, “*Acedia* is evenings without number obliterated by television, evenings neither of entertainment nor of education but of narcotized defense against time and duty. Above all, *acedia* is apathy, the refusal to engage the pathos of other lives and of God’s life with them” (Freedom for Ministry).

For too many of us, the hustle and bustle of electronic activity is a sad expression of a deeper *acedia*. We feel busy, but not with a hobby or recreation or play. We are busy with busyness. Rather than figure out what to do with our spare minutes and hours, we are content to swim in the shallows and pass our time with passing the time. How many of us, growing too accustomed to the *acedia* of our age, feel this strange mix of busyness and lifelessness? We are always engaged with our thumbs, but rarely engaged with our thoughts. We keep downloading information, but rarely get down into the depths of our hearts. That’s *acedia*—purposelessness disguised as constant commotion.

He was speaking and preaching to a people who were surrounded by commotion. For them, it was the commotion of persecution. They lived in an urban area. They faced temptations to turn against the Lord. But we, too, share in that same commotion. But maybe it’s not the onslaught of persecution for our faith; it is the onslaught in the persecution for our time and our moments, that fills our hours with business, but only in the shallows. And we forget to stop and ask—sorry for such a mundane phrase, but—*Who am I? What am I doing? What is my purpose? Who do I belong to?* And we find ourselves at the end of a day exhausted and yet strangely unfulfilled, longing for something that all of our business cannot quite attain.

And so we think in our spiritual lives and in our lives that somehow this sluggishness and this listlessness and this apathy does not find its home in our own relationship with the Lord. As Theresa Avila once said, one of the greatest things that was the death of her spiritual life? It was not outward temptation. It was inward self-reliance and self-dependence. How was she shipwrecked in her faith oftentimes by self-reliance? It was because she thought God was not interested in the mundane aspects of her everyday life, and that she would go to him for trouble. But when the trouble would pass, then it was just going on as life would do. And she would just simply go on about, trusting in her own talents, her own abilities, her own schedule. And she was surrounded by others who would support her in that. But she did not scarcely see it as spiritual apathy or spiritual drifting.

He’s writing to them because this danger which is a danger that creeps ever so slightly and ever so carefully, but will take over as a web does, over our entire life. And we will find ourselves jaded and cynical about things of the Lord. And we do not turn to him, or we’re slow in turning to him. And what happens is we are tempted. We give party to that temptation. Then it turns to habit. And instead of turning to the Lord by habit, we turn to ourselves and to our tools to provide answers for questions only we are asking and not asking the Lord, *What is your will, O Lord?* The same kind of thing was happening in the hearts of the people to whom he was preaching. And he’s warning them, “Be careful. Have you taken the grace of God for granted?”

But then the question becomes, if they are made aware of it—if we are made aware by the Holy Spirit of our spiritual apathy, our spiritual drifting, then why do we not do something about it? When he says to them, “We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard so that we do not drift away,” he’s warning them not only just about spiritual drifting, but he’s warning them how apathy also becomes the fuel that keeps us from doing anything about it. Because we begin to say to

ourselves, “I can focus on deeper spiritual growth once the kids are grown, once I have more time after I’ve retired, after this crisis at work has passed, or when I get a better job, or when I get married, or when I turn eighteen, or when I’m done with college, or when I’m done for the summer. I simply don’t have time for my own depth of growth in holiness and grace.” But what really is owning the day is our own spiritual apathy. That becomes the fuel. Because the habits of drifting now shape our motivations. And we say, “I’ll wait for a better time and a better place.” And so we continue to drift.

But the point of the warning is this: now is the only acceptable time. The Lord never grows weary, never grows lazy from receiving us. Whether it’s every single day we come to the throne, “Lord, forgive me for my spiritual drifting and apathy,” he doesn’t care that we do it every day. Because he calls us to do it now. We think, “As long as I get my life swept up into a corner organized, then I’ll go to the Lord with all the things I need to work on.” But he says, “No. Now is the acceptable time.” But our spiritual apathy says to us, *What’s the hurry? Why bother?*

It’s because we think we’re masters of time—that we will have time. Martin Luther King in his letter from a Birmingham jail wrote of the problem when we think we’re masters of time. He talked about those who agreed with his position but who wanted to give him other advice. He says of them, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action; who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a ‘more convenient season.’” He says:

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

For what he spoke about was the human injustice of inequality before the law for people of color. But what fed that is the very same thing that feeds our apathy. It’s that we believe there will be a more convenient time—that we are masters of time. We don’t need to worry about it. It’s not that big of a deal. *Why are you in such a hurry?* Well, the warning, the preacher of Hebrews says, is the word which thunders from heaven: we must pay most careful attention now.

He then says these things. Verse two, “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” Here’s the comparison. So the warning, he talks about the apathy. The whole idea of paying attention is *now is the moment*. But he then gives a comparison. And the comparison is to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. And here, he refers to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. And in the giving of the law, the Lord spoke through his angels to the people, giving them what they need. And then he called them to follow him, told them exactly what he was going to do, how he was going to do it, and the time he was going to do it, and through whom he was going to do it. And yet, they found themselves shaking in fear that the Lord had led them out into the desert to simply have them killed. And they did not believe.

Now, he says, “They neglected, they ignored my promises, which is why that generation never entered the Promised Land.” Because they neglected his salvation. Now the preacher of Hebrews says, if that was the case for them, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? If you were here the first Sunday—or if you weren’t—I’ll repeat this idea. The whole point that he will do—the comparison point he will do through the entire sermon of Hebrews, is he is comparing the old covenant with the new covenant. And that is, they had received in part the Gospel of grace and they’d saw it in the promises of

God, but they didn't see its full fruition or full fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ, in the coming of the kingdom, in the announcement of the Gospel, in the giving of the one and final sacrifice, Jesus Christ, upon the cross and being raised from death to life. They had not seen that.

So his point is, if this was true of them and they did not escape his wrath because they neglected his salvation, how much more do we think we can escape his wrath if we neglect his salvation? Now, what do I mean? Here, I am saying the idea of neglecting is this. If we know the Lord Jesus Christ and we trust in him for salvation and for forgiveness, we have the reality of his grace which has been met in the work of Jesus Christ. His wrath is satisfied. But if we fall asleep and neglect these promises, we're not in fear of falling into his wrath, but we will not experience the blessing that he intends. But let me say clearly, if we neglect this salvation which is offered, this welcome, this love, this grace—if we neglect it altogether, we will not escape his wrath. That is the clear preaching of Scripture. It is meant to be rhetorical. How shall we escape if we ignore? The idea of ignoring is rejecting.

So I recognize that there are some here that do not know the Lord. And perhaps you hate every word I'm saying right now. I know I once did. But I will say to you, the Lord's word to you this morning is welcome and grace, forgiveness and renewal, purpose and love. Do not neglect the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ alone. For if you neglect it, we are not masters of our time. We will not escape his wrath.

But believer? Fellow Christian? And I'm going to finish with this point. As I have studied and slept and reflected and prayed in this passage, God's Holy Spirit has demonstrated to me just how much spiritual sloth and apathy has infected my own soul. And you might say, "Well, now, you're a pastor. How does that happen?" But isn't that the issue? I'm called to deliver this Word. I studied this Word. I got a degree in this Word. It is all the more easy for me to be apathetic towards the Word of God. So I ask you to pray for your pastors.

But my testimony to you is this. As I prepared this Word, and even as I got to the finish of this first point—which, in my planning, was much shorter—was this: the Holy Spirit kept saying to me, *Now. Now, Randy. Come to me and confess*, where I have allowed apathy and sloth to creep in, where the business and commotion that rings out for my attention can easily drown out time with God. But do you know? I heard that invitation not as one of wrath, but one of love. Because what my Father desires for me, he desires for you: he wants to be in relationship with us. He wants us to know the blessing that comes with union and intimacy with him, to know the ever-present power of the Holy Spirit that feeds us by the Word, that gives us wisdom and discernment, that gives us a place, gives us light, gives us truth, and does not change.

And he's called me again to evaluate the areas of my life—and I say to you, Christian, where have you allowed apathy to creep in? Where have you allowed the business and commotion to drown out the Word of God? When did you stop responding to the promptings of the Spirit to pray? When have you stopped allowing the Spirit to tame your tongue? When did you stop saying to the Lord in the most mundane of things as well as in the great things, *Not my will, but your will be done*. The Lord invites us again to this renewal. He is the one who enlightens us by his Spirit to our apathy. But I warn you, it is hard work. It is a wrestling. And it cannot be done apart from Jesus Christ and his grace and spirit. For Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Apart from me, you can do nothing." So he calls us to himself by his grace, but he also renews us by that same grace. It is wrestling. It is gut-wrenching. It is hard. But it is worth it. It is worth it. For it will render our wrestling as light and momentary things. For he will bless us with his grace and mercy. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for your Word. I thank you for your power. I thank you for your renewing promises. Father, I want to continue in the work of your Spirit and confess before these, my brothers and sisters in Christ, Father, I confess to you my own spiritual apathy. And I ask that you would visit us by the power of your Holy Spirit to renew us. But Father, I come to you on their behalf and ask that you would

make known to them the delight and power of your wonderful compassion and mercies. May you awaken us today to our sloth and renew us by the power of the Spirit through your grace to seek you, that we may not turn away from this blessing. And for those who do not know you, Father, I pray that they would know you today. Today. Today. For your grace is greater than all our sin, and you make us new. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.