

At Our Own Peril, Part II

Hebrews 2:1-12

1/28/18

Randy Lovelace

So last week in the preaching on the text of Hebrews 2:1-4, my intention was to finish, but alas, I did not. So as I was saying last week, this is part two. So we look again at Hebrews 2. This week we look at verses one through nine. Last week, we looked at this passage as the warning that will continue to be repeated throughout the letter, the sermon of Hebrews that is to us a letter. It was a sermon to those who first received it. His desire was to warn them.

And that warning really can be encapsulated in this one idea of drifting. It is a nautical term that refers to what one might envision that to refer to. The idea that if you are not firmly anchored, then you will simply drift according to the currents that you find yourself in. And his concern for those who were converted to Christ, who are now walking with the Lord and had been for some time in a metropolitan sort of urban area that was greater Rome—they had begun to drift. And they were finding themselves following the currents that were around them, concerned that naming Christ and naming their trust in him would mean even greater persecution. And so they had forgotten what they had first heard, and they were becoming increasingly dulled to who God was and who Christ was. And he's reminding them.

But it isn't just a warning. The warning comes united with an imperative and then a provision. This week, we're looking together at the imperative that he gives here in these verses, but also the provision. So look with me if you will, Hebrews 2. If you have your Bibles, you can turn there. If not, we have the passages available for you projected. Hebrews 2—hear now the Word of God.

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.

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere,

“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?
You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,
putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

[ESV]

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

Now we ask you, O Lord, we ask that you would speak to us, for your servants are listening. Give us ears to hear and eyes to see wondrous things in your Word. By your Spirit, speak to us through this Word. Open our ears and our hearts to be invited again and again into the grace of Christ. Do this, we ask. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So in this first verse, verse one, he says, "Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard." This is then repeated in different ways. Because he then goes into what that message is. The message is what was declared by the angels. The message is declared through the failure of Israel in the Old Testament to listen to God's warning. He encourages them to listen and to be reminded what they have heard concerning who Christ is and what has been testified to what the purpose was for his incarnation. And so this week we're going to look at this imperative of paying closer attention, and then secondly at the provision. Imperative and provision.

Okay. So first, the imperative—this paying much closer attention to what we have heard. Let me establish first that, while it is not directly commanded here, the message which this people would have heard, which is why they're being called again and again to trust, to remember, to return to Jesus Christ—the imperative to pay much closer attention is to first and foremost this reality: it is because they are—and all those who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—are united to Christ. They would have heard this message. The letters of Paul would have already been circulated among the churches around this entire area. They would have heard the message that those who are in Christ from Jesus's own testimony of their union with him.

We are reminded of this when Paul says in Philippians 4:13 these words, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." I can do all things through him—this whole language of the idea that what we do as believers trusting in Christ is this idea that we do so by his strength. From him and to him. Therefore, our union with him is extremely important reality to be called back to, to pay attention to—that which we do in the flesh, that which we do in the mind, that which we do in our work, that which we do in our play, all of our relationships—all of it is done in and through Christ, which is why the warning of drifting, "Do not drift away, because you are united to him. You have heard this," he says.

From Jesus' own words in John 14:5, he says—Thomas responds after Jesus has spoken. Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my father also. From now on, you do know him and you have seen him." Jesus is saying that to even know the Father, to see the Father is to know Christ and to see him. This would be richly established just one chapter later. Jesus would go through the whole teaching of being the vine, and we are the branches. We cannot do anything apart from Christ. Well, what does that mean?

Can we do things apart from him? Yes. His whole point is, what does it mean to walk with God in Christ by faith? What does it mean to flourish and grow as a Christian? What does it mean to experience the presence of God's grace? It means all of it can be done only through Christ. We cannot be the source of grace. We cannot be the source of power to sustain us in our walk of faith. All of it comes from Christ alone. We are united to him. This will be the great proclamation of the preacher of Hebrews as he goes throughout the chapters—that Jesus has died on our behalf. We are united to him in his death. His death is for us salvation. We die with him. But glory be to God, Christ is raised from the dead. We, too, are united to that. How will we experience resurrection from the dead? Because Christ has been resurrected from the dead. He is the first-born among many. We are united to him. This is what they have heard. This is what you have heard. Let us be careful not to drift from it.

This has application every day in how we interact in relationships. How are we to love, for example, our enemies? How do we do this? How are we to love others? How are we to serve others? How are we to forgive as we are forgiven? How are we to provide for our families? All of it is done with the recognition that from Christ is all that we need for life and for godliness, and to him are all things. There

is not one single square inch of our existence that is outside of Christ's sovereign rule and the blessing of his grace. To follow Christ is to be united to him. Be careful that we do not drift from it or think of it too little. It isn't just for forgiveness. It isn't just for when we're in the foxhole and we need help. It is the living and breathing out of every day. First his union.

Secondly, when he says "pay attention," he's calling on us to exercise our effort. So if we are united to Christ and we have all the sustaining grace we need, we are called to exert that grace in the effort of obedience and walking in obedience. If we do not call one another to acts of obedience and to exercising our effort, our strength, which comes from and is sustained by Christ's grace—if we fail to exercise that effort, we are in disobedience. We don't learn obedience by simply sitting around hoping that it will happen. We learn obedience by new actions, new rhythms. We know that the Scriptures say, "Pray." Well, I'm not going to just suddenly wake up one morning and suddenly always feel like praying. I have to exercise the effort to pray. I'm not just going to wake up on a Wednesday morning and go, "I'm just going to read Scripture." No. I'm not going to read Scripture, left to myself. Let me say that clearly. I am not going to read Scripture, left to myself. Randy Lovelace. It is only by the Spirit's empowering grace to remind me that I need it. But I then have to get up off my can and start forming new rhythms and habits of reading it. It's not like using God as a cheat sheet, that what Jesus did or what the Holy Spirit does is enough, and we'll just kind of take the scraps from the table. I've got to exert effort.

I'm saying this and preaching this as much to myself as to anyone else. Because otherwise, we render Jesus's words as just pious and very religious when he says the following in Matthew 5, in talking about how we're to treat those who are our enemies, at the conclusion of saying we are to love our enemies. He says this in verse forty-eight, "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Is that just saying, "Well, someday we'll be," and we're just sort of biding time? No, the inference that what Jesus is saying—we have to act. And we have to walk in obedience. And in this case, it was to love our enemies. When they poke. When they bully. When they sneer. When they post. When they ignore. When they reject. When they're angry. When they stab us in the back. There is simply one call in this chapter. He says, "Love your enemies." That is an incredible call to obedience. We cannot do it except by his grace, because we were once his enemies. But now he has called us friends. And by that grace to which we are united, and only by that grace, are we enabled to love our enemies and see them as Christ sees us. But I still have to act and move towards them in peace. It requires effort. And so the preacher of Hebrews says, "Pay attention."

And I don't know about you, but I'm not doing so great. Do I always love my enemies? No. Do I want to fire back? Yes. And so internally, I wrestle with things. Don't you? If we just choose this as an example. You feel it boiling up inside of you, and you imagine what you really want to say. And so you say it in your head. And now, it is better that you didn't actually say it. But my internal attitude, my internal coordination is not for their flourishing and their forgiveness. I'm just sitting there going, "I can't believe you just did that." So what do I need to do, then? It's the third part of paying attention. If we are united by that grace, we are called to pay attention and to give effort to walking by obedience, I am going to realize very quickly how far short I fall. I need to come again and again to confession and repentance. That's the point. Confession and repentance. Asking the Lord through great pain, through great tribulation, through trial and through wrestling, "What am I holding onto?"

We begin to drift from the Lord when we are not acknowledging our sin to him. Because sin starts at temptation. It becomes a new habit. It becomes a hardening of our hearts. And we drift very quickly away from the Lord. But that process can take months. It can even take years. But it can be subtle, and often it is not dramatic. But it requires again and again for us to live at the address of confession and repentance. "You have united me to grace. You've called me to effort. Yet I recognize this sin that still remains. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Forgive me." Pay close attention.

The fourth part, which I believe is the whole reason why the preacher of Hebrews is saying this imperative—why does he want us to pay close attention? Why does he say to us, "This is who Christ is." It

is because union with him, walking in obedience, walking and leaning on the Lord through forgiveness and confession and repentance, is a journey worth taking. Because we are from him, and we will return to him. We are created in his image, and we find what it means to walk with him when we recognize that though this journey is hard and long and difficult at times, it is worth it. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.
[ESV]

The reason why we exert effort, the reason why we are reminded of our union with Christ, the reason why we need this sustaining grace and forgiveness through repentance—we are reminded that despite all of this, the journey is worth it. Because he tells us that what we are experiencing now is light and momentary and is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory. He's making us more and more into his image. And there we begin to find what it means to be fulfilled in following Christ.

Now, this imperative of paying close attention is a call, of course, not just to the church, house churches spread around Rome, but it is to every church in every age. As I said last week, it bears repeating that we live in an age of distraction. I catch myself when someone asks, "Am I busy?" And I say, "Yes, I'm busy." But I mean, everybody's busy. And sometimes we're busy with substantive things. Sometimes we're busy with things that are meaningless. But we're busy, and we're distracted. And we look for places to try to figure out, "How am I growing?" And before we know it, the business of life pushes out the things that are most necessary. The imperative of paying close attention to our walk with Christ. And then we're growing and we're trying to walk on borrowed capital of previous periods of spiritual growth. But this invitation is not one to guilt, but it is to grace. He's inviting us again through the preacher's words, through the work of Christ, "Pay attention. Return. I'm inviting you again to receive the grace you need to return to the message which you have heard."

But having said all of that, he also gives us the provision. All of those imperatives, all of it involves within a context, within a picture, within a framework of recognition that it is Christ who is the provision. When he says in verse four, he says, "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." What is he pointing to? The first thing he has provided is the testimony of God's Word. Yes, it is low-hanging fruit for me as a pastor to say that the thing which God provides is the testimony of the saints who have gone before us, the testimony of those who have written to the church through the guidance and provision and power of the Holy Spirit the Word which records for us the miracles and teachings of the Lord. That is to equip us and remind us that this can be historically validated. Questioned. Looked at. Investigated.

So with that in mind, he calls us, of course, when he says, "It was declared to us first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard." He's talking about the apostles, but also Moses and Abraham and Jeremiah and Isaiah and the psalms. This has been written for our growth, for our encouragement, for our equipping. Why? Because it declares who God is, how he has made us, how he interacts with us, how he has provided for us. And thanks be to God, this Word declares that he has spoken to us. And he is still speaking. And it is a rich Word for us every day.

But the provision is not just the testimony. It's what the testimony ultimately points to. And it is verses five through nine, the power, when he says, "For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, 'What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?'" What was David asking that question for? He was asking it

rhetorically, because he was humbled by the fact that—why in the world would God care about little old me? Why? Who is man? You're God.

This question, while asked rhetorically, was for me the linchpin prior to becoming a Christian. My best friend was a good twenty years older than me. We were fellow cyclists. I remember I was out on my very first mountain bike ride. I had never even heard of a mountain bike. It was 1985. It was hot in South Carolina. But he worked for a bike shop, and he built this bike up. We went on a mountain bike ride together. His name is Lane. I don't know if Lane is still alive today. But I remember riding with Lane for those miles and miles on a mountain bike. And I said, "Wow, this is really great. I think this is going to catch on." And I thought to myself, "What is life?" And so we started talking about life.

And on that bike ride, Lane declared to me, "You know," he's like, "I believe there's a God. That's fine. I just don't think he's all that particularly interested in me. God's got a lot of other stuff to worry about than me." And I remember thinking, *Yeah, that sounds about right*. I grew up in the South, where Jesus is talked about, but he's more like a ghost. He's talked about. He's kind of everywhere. But do you really know him? I certainly didn't. He was a ghost in my house. And so it was easy for me to slide into this worldview that God is present, and maybe he had something to do with all of this, but he has no room or no interest in me. And if he does, I'm really not that interested in him.

And so with the psalmist, when I read this for the very first time, I read it not as one who was asking it as I once asked it. I'm now asking it as the psalmist did. Because I came into a personal relationship with God in Christ, and I recognized that, yes, I'm just one of billions. And yet in God's power and God's grace, he's not just mindful; he knows me. And it drew me to a place of humility. And every time I read it, I say with the psalmist, "That's exactly right—why?" And the only answer is but for his grace and his love. What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? So here's the answer in verse seven. He's talking about—the "him" he's talking about is Jesus Christ. "You made him a little lower than the angels. You crowned him with glory and honor." That glory and honor was the cross that was to the world weakness. That was the honor. Because Christ on our behalf took on our sin, that we might have life. And he put to death the power of sin and it's paid for us in completeness.

Verse eight, "putting everything in subjection under his feet. Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control." How can he put everything in his control? Because Christ was raised from the dead, victorious over sin and death. And he put everything under his control. Christ is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, which he's already talked about in chapter one. And he has all the power, and heaven and earth belong to him. But the natural question is what he says next, "At present, we do not see everything in subjection to him." I don't. Do you? And so this is where the drifting happens. I'm tempted to look at my circumstances, I'm tempted to look at the world around me, and go, "Man, this is not looking great." I don't know how we can say that everything is in subjection to him. And we can easily drift on that point, and we begin to rely on ourselves. "God doesn't have this. I've got this—or, I'm going to try."

But then he says, "But we see," and he's calling the church again, "we see him for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death." You see? The crowning of glory and honor because of the suffering of death, "so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. So he's saying—and he uses as the example, and he takes us back—you remember, if you're familiar at all with the Gospels, that at the moment at which Jesus was placed on the cross, his disciples said, "Yeah, this is not looking good," and they left. But the preacher of Hebrews says, "No. Now we know. Now we know that that is not the point at which we turn and run; that's the point where God is saying, 'Victory over sin. Victory of death. This is the crowning and the glory. You see it as defeat. This is my grace being dispersed. For my Son was made a little lower than the angels for a little while, so that he might taste death for everyone. He was made in subjection, a little lower than

the angels, but that is not the end of the story.” And if that’s not the end of the story with Christ on the cross, it is his resurrection. What then, I ask of you, Columbia Presbyterian Church, what in this world, what in your life cannot receive this answer? He is still on the throne. And in the moment which you believe you are defeated, in the moment which you believe you’re ready to put up the red flag, in the moment you believe there is no hope, in the moment you don’t know what’s going to come tomorrow, the answer is, *Return again to the One who is seated on the throne.*

No one would have imagined that the pathway to victory would have been through the cross. And absolutely no one would have imagined that the declaration of victory would have come through resurrection from the dead. If they were not expecting it, what can we then say? “Lord, are you ready to surprise us? I don’t know. All I know is, I can only give you my circumstances. I don’t know. All I can do is give you my cancer. All I know is, I give you this broken relationship. All I know is, I give you this pain, this difficulty. Lord, what can you do? I can’t see it. But your Word tells me you are seated on the throne. I don’t know how you’re going to finish the story. But I know because of what has been testified, because of the miracles, because of what has been written, your Word tells me that in the end—in the end, it will be grace, according to your will and in your timing.”

Can we see everything in subjection to him? No. But we know. We know that it is, because of what has come before. Let us not drift from what we have heard. Let us not fall prey to every difficulty and challenge and wave and current that tells us, “No, he’s not in control.” Let us return again to the invitation of his grace, that if at the point of human weakness of Christ on a cross meant grace for us, how much more then in his salvation and you in his hands will he not take us and do according to his will that which glorifies his name and is for us our good? This is the Lord to whom we worship. This is the one who is worthy of praise. Help us, Lord, in our unbelief. Meet us by your grace. And may the Lord encourage and strengthen you today wherever he has you. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we want to thank you this morning for this word. We thank you for this warning. We thank you for this imperative. But we thank you, O Lord, for your provision of Christ Jesus our Lord. It is Christ. It is Christ who has given us the grace. So we ask you, O Lord, that by your grace you will help us not to drift, that by your grace and by your power we will walk into obedience. But Lord, please again by your Spirit remind us that in every way and in all things, it is from you, it is by you, and it is for you. Help us, we ask. In Jesus’ name. Amen.