

4. The first five verses of chapter two comprise the first exhortation in the Hebrews epistle. As noted before, the writer followed a consistent pattern in his letter, in which he punctuated sections of his instruction with an exhortation that highlights a primary implication of that instruction. In that way, he made sure his readers grasped his meaning and its import and applied it properly to their own faith and practice. Here, his exhortation proceeded out of his instruction comparing Jesus with God's angelic servants, but with a focus on something the Son and angels share in common, rather than what distinguishes them. That commonality is their role as *testators*: Both are God's ambassadors appointed to bring His word to men. And since the Son and angels both speak on God's behalf, men are obligated to embrace and obey the words of both. But this is where the writer introduced the crucial distinction that is the focal point of his exhortation: *The Son's superiority over the angels implies that there is a greater gravity to His words and a greater consequence for failing to embrace and conform to them.*

- a. The author introduced his exhortation with the phrase, "on this account" (often rendered *for this reason* or *therefore*), which told his readers that he was going to draw out an implication of his preceding instruction: If the Son is superior to the angels – and He is, and if angelic testimony is unalterable and binding, how much more is that true of the Son's testimony? In making his point, then, the writer presented an *a fortiori* (from the lesser to the greater) argument, which was common in Jewish reasoning and rhetoric and characterizes his approach throughout the epistle (ref. 3:1-6, 7:8, 23-25, 8:1-6, 9:13-14, 10:11-12, 28-29, 12:7-10; cf. also Proverbs 11:31, 15:11, 21:27; Amos 2:1; Matthew 11:20-24, 12:10-12; Luke 23:27-31; Romans 5:15-21, 11:12, 24; 2 Corinthians 3:7-11; etc.).

It's not just that the Son Himself is superior to the angels, the same is true of His testimony. The angels testified to men with a view to God's promised day of deliverance and renewal; the Son's testimony (in His person, words, and deeds) affirmed that that day had come; He spoke of the "*great salvation*" the angelic ministration anticipated and served. But more than simply speaking of it, Jesus *embodied* Yahweh's salvation as the incarnate Word. In Him, all of what God had spoken of from the beginning was now coming to pass.

Jesus was the human embodiment of God's revealed word (Torah), and so His deeds, as well as His words, commanded a proper response from all who observed and listened to Him. He came into the world as the living, tangible word of God, but a word that men could willfully resist and refuse (John 1:11, 5:39-40). But beyond that, those who did embrace Him could find themselves unwittingly drifting away from Him and His word through carelessness or distraction. Thus the Hebrews writer exhorted his readers to apply all diligence to hold fast to what they'd heard, lest they find themselves straying from it (2:1). This verb was used in various ways, and carried with it two primary images. The first was a ship adrift, either because it had slipped anchor, or because wind or currents carried it off course. The other was a ring that slipped unnoticed off a finger, to become lost to its owner. The present context suggests the first image, but both involve the same dynamic, namely an imperceptible falling away through inattentiveness.

The possibility of people who've embraced Christ and His gospel drifting away from Him typically carries the minds of contemporary readers to the question of eternal security and whether a person can "lose his salvation." But the Hebrews writer wasn't concerned with this question at this point, though he would soon speak to it (6:1-8). The issue here isn't a false or temporary embrace of Jesus, but the obligation of those who embrace Him to hold tightly to Him with a disciplined, diligent and undistracted grasp. Even those who've truly found life in Jesus are able to wander from its truth and power (Ephesians 4:17-24).

- b. Again, the point of comparison in the exhortation is angelic testimony versus that of the Son. Both share a divine origin and nature, and the writer highlighted this with respect to the angels by reminding his readers that their words were unalterable and carried an exacting penalty for disregard and disobedience. This reminder was just that, and the writer gave it for rhetorical effect. He wasn't telling his readers anything they didn't know; they understood from their Scriptures and their own history that the word spoken by Yahweh's angels is just as binding and consequential as words from His own mouth.

The writer spoke only in general terms, suggesting that he wasn't singling out any particular angelic utterance. At the same time, the context seems to point toward the angels' role in God's communication of the Sinai Covenant (Law of Moses). It was those "words" that especially bound Israel with the obligation to hear and heed and imposed explicit penalties for disobedience. It was also the words of the covenant that Israel was repeatedly warned about straying from (cf. Exodus 24:1-8 with Deuteronomy 6:1-25). At the same time, the Old Testament scriptures never directly mention angels playing a role in the giving of the covenant, though Moses' final blessing on the tribes of Israel comes close to suggesting this (Deuteronomy 33:2). The Hebrew text is unclear, but seems to read, "*He came from the midst of a multitude of holy ones,*" which the Septuagint translators rendered as the Lord coming *with* a multitude of angels. This translation reflects the common Jewish view of that time that angels were indeed involved in the ministration of the covenant at Sinai, a view that both Stephen and Paul seemed to have held (cf. Acts 7:52-53; Galatians 3:19).

- c. Perhaps the best indication that the writer had the Sinai episode in mind is his parallel allusion to the New Covenant and its gospel. He didn't mention either covenant, but instead spoke of the danger of neglecting "so great a salvation." But it's clear that he was referring to the good news of the New Covenant in the Messiah, for this was the "salvation" spoken by the Lord Jesus, which was then proclaimed by His witnesses and confirmed by His Spirit (2:3-4).

This raises the question of why the Hebrews writer chose to express his point this way. If the issue is straying from Jesus' words ("what we have heard"), why did he refer to this straying as "neglecting so great a salvation"? One possibility is that he was viewing Jesus' words as instruction concerning salvation. Thus, drifting from Jesus' instruction is turning aside from the salvation He heralded.

This perspective, then, gives the impression that the writer was speaking about those who disregard or distort the “gospel message” by which people are saved. In this case, his warning pertains to the condemnation that awaits those who set aside Jesus’ offer of salvation. But this view doesn’t at all suit the context, and so must be rejected. *The writer wasn’t concerned with what people do with the message of salvation, but how Christians order themselves in relation to Jesus’ instruction in light of the salvation – the new life – that they possess in Him.* His warning wasn’t directed toward prospective converts, but to those who are in Christ. This is obvious from the context, but also from the fact that he included himself in his warning: “*we must pay closer attention to what we have heard...*” (vv. 1, 3).

The tragic outcome the writer was warning about isn’t the final condemnation of those who reject Jesus, but the declension, loss and shame that inescapably come to Christians who aren’t watchful and diligent in living out their salvation (Philippians 2:12). Yes, some might prove in the end to have never known Him (ref. 3:12-15, 6:1-8), but many others will find their negligence producing the worthless yield of “wood, hay, and straw” (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). The writer recognized that some of his readers might depart from Jesus entirely, but here he was more focused on the insidious threat of carelessness and compromise. His warning reflects his fear of these brethren straying from Jesus, even while believing that they were holding onto Him. Furthermore, he wasn’t so much concerned with negligence in their practice, as in their understanding and thinking – their drifting away from the *truth* as it is in Jesus (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:1-4; Ephesians 4:11-24; 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 6:20-21; 1 John 5:18-21; 2 John 1-4; etc.).

- d. One final consideration (driven more by contemporary concerns than those of the writer) is the matter of “signs and wonders” in attesting Jesus’ words (v. 4b). Many have viewed this statement as biblical warrant for the idea that supernatural manifestations of the Spirit’s power are crucial to the effectiveness of gospel preaching. This was the premise of the “power evangelism” idea popularized by the Vineyard movement. But this claim must be argued on other bases than this passage, for the writer was speaking about the *apostolic* ministry and how God confirmed the truth of their testimony about Jesus, not providing a pattern for evangelism. There were no scriptures affirming their message, and the message itself was radical and unthinkable: The apostles proclaimed a new order of human existence – the kingdom of God – that had Jesus’ resurrection at the center. In that early setting, such a message demanded attestation that *manifested* its truth.

Though not stated, this exhortation hints at a challenge these Jewish believers likely faced from their countrymen: *Whereas God had confirmed the truth of Torah by mediating it through angelic beings, this new “word” concerning Jesus was merely the testimony of men.* But the truth was that the apostolic gospel had an even greater and more compelling attestation. For Jesus Himself had proclaimed this “word,” and His witness was authenticated by His resurrection (Romans 1:1-4). And now Yahweh was adding His own “amen” by the powerful working of His Spirit. But this greater witness pertained to a greater *word* – the ultimate and complete Word that compels faith and faithfulness.