

Warning Against Spiritual Drift

Although the scriptures are replete with warnings against spiritual drift, sadly, many Christians are not regularly exposing themselves to God's Word nor are they connected in a healthy way to the local church. In this article, I want to begin to take a look at a passage of scripture from the New Testament that gives a clear warning against spiritual drift in our Christian lives. The passage is Hebrews 2:1-4; let's take a look at verse 1: "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it."

The word translated 'therefore' connects our passage to all of chapter 1. Our author is saying in effect, "in light of all the wonderful truths about Jesus including: he is the Son of God; the world was created through him; he sustains the universe by his powerful word (1:1-3), we must pay much closer attention to what we've heard, lest we drift away from it." Interestingly, in this first verse there are two words that are nautical terms in the Greek language (the New Testament was originally written in Greek. It was many years later before it was translated into English). The word translated 'drift' literally means 'to slip away' and can speak of a ship drifting without a firm anchor to hold it in place. In some extra-biblical writings the word was used of something that just slips your mind or of a ring that slips off your finger. The idea then, whether of the ship drifting off course or the ring slipping off your finger, is that spiritual drift tends to happen largely unnoticed.

The second nautical term in this first verse is translated 'pay attention.' This word pertains to carefully guiding a ship to harbor. It refers to intentional, diligent effort and focus on the task at hand. In our text, the writer of Hebrews is saying that we need to pay the 'closest attention' to the 'message' (vs. 2). This message—God's Word—is all inclusive and pertains to the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ as well as all that God's word teaches about living lives that are pleasing in his sight. The Holy Bible, then, is a steadfast anchor as well as a safe harbor for our lives.

There's an obvious concern expressed here that we may be drifting away from God and not even be aware of it. How can this happen? We can often convince ourselves that as long as we're generally nice, moral people and as long as we've not fallen into some grievous sin, we're basically okay. We may even convince ourselves that there's no real need to be obedient to clear commands from scripture such as: full commitment to the local church for worship and spiritual nourishment, devotion to other Christians in loving fellowship (Ephesians 4:1-16; Hebrews 10:24-25) and the use of our gifts in the context of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7).

We can be living in our own, self-centered comfort zone, doing whatever we think works best for us and for our busy lives in the moment. We may not even notice that we've come untethered from our anchor and we're drifting toward the jagged rocks of pain, sadness and unhealthy fear. We're no longer intentionally steering the ship of our lives toward safe harbor according to the guidance from God's word. Theologian and Christian author, D.A. Carson once

wrote about how Christians are prone—not only to drift—but to seek to justify our current lives and choices. He writes,

“People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace driven effort people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to scripture, faith and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom...we cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking that we’ve escaped legalism; we stride toward godlessness and convince ourselves that we’ve been liberated.” Although God never gives up on his people, the choices that we make have real, and often harmful, consequences. May God help us to put forth intentional, grace empowered effort to keep our lives from spiritually drifting away from him.

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