

Dangerous Drifting

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon warns of the danger of drifting away from God's salvation and the severe consequences that follow, urging listeners to pay attention to God's word and return to Him.

Duration: 36:53

Scripture: Matthew 23:37-39, Hebrews 1:1-2, Hebrews 2:1-4, Hebrews 2:9-10, Hebrews 2:14-15

Topics: "Drifting"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the danger of drifting away from the gospel message. He urges the audience to pay careful attention to what they have heard and not allow themselves to drift away. The speaker uses nautical language to describe the peril of drifting and not responding to the gospel. He also highlights the tragic consequences of secular knowledge leading people to switch themselves off, resulting in the loss of lives, particularly among students. The speaker encourages the audience to give earnest heed to the gospel message and find a way to escape the consequences of drifting away.

Transcript

It's chapter 2, and I think that the subject as introduced in the calendar is very evident, very evidently based on the passage there. I think it will be appropriate if we read it once again because I would pray that the thrust of this whole passage might, by the grace of God, grip us tonight. We are all, I fear, we are all in danger of drifting whether we be professing Christian or whether we be not Christian.

And there is a danger here which we need to look at. Let me just read these first four verses once again, therefore. In the light of everything that the writer has said in the first chapter, now he comes, and you notice, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, the 7th verse is therefore, and he links what he's saying here with what has gone before, and that therefore is a very important link.

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation which was first announced by the Lord was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders, and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

If it is true that there is only one true God, as we believe, and if he has spoken to mankind, and particularly if he has spoken to mankind in a person who is equal to himself, so that he was able to say everything he

wanted to say, and do everything he wanted to do, then it follows necessarily, does it not, that failure to take heed to what God has said and done involves us in very serious consequences. If there is only one God and he has spoken, and we fail to take it seriously, surely the consequences must be grave. Now, having made such cardinal statements as he has made at the beginning of the first chapter, the writer of this letter comes in chapter 2, he comes here to enlarge and to apply some of the implications.

And one of the implications is wrapped up in what I have just tried to say. We cannot believe that there is only one God who has spoken to mankind in his co-equal Son. We cannot truly believe that and play with it.

We must take earnest heed to what God, the omnipotent Creator, Lord and Judge, has said, if he has spoken at all. Now, this is a very remarkable passage. It's one of the great, one of the gigantic passages we find in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

I want to take just one or two threads out of it this evening and let them speak for themselves. We shall keep as close as we can to the maritime or the nautical language that is employed here. And I want us to begin by looking at the peril that is perceived by the writer.

It comes out in the first verse. We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we've heard, so that we do not drift away. So that we do not drift away.

He envisages the peril of men and women who have apparently heard the gospel tidings, but drifting away from it, not being gripped by it, not responding to it, not having chosen to believe it and receive it and act upon it, as we said in singing just now that we were doing. The evident danger envisaged here, therefore, is precisely that. There were those among these Hebrew Christians that are addressed whom the writer felt had simply gone through the motions of a kind of decision.

But there were evidences in their lives which pointed to the fact that really the thing could not be real. They were not really anchored in Christ. They were not really loyal to Him.

As a matter of fact, they were drifting away from the very port of entrance into the continent of Christian salvation. There are a number of pictures, I believe, a number of metaphors in the mind of the writer as he writes these words. Now, we cannot dogmatize as to what predominates, but it's evident that some such picture as this or some such pictures as these are somewhere in the back of his mind.

He's thinking, first of all, of individual people in terms of a ship on voyage. He may say that it's a quaint picture, but it's a very significant picture. He thinks of people as boats or ships on the high seas of life moving, going somewhere.

I don't know whether you've ever thought of yourself like that. As a ship on the high seas moving, going somewhere. But behind that, there is another picture.

Now, this can be otherwise understood, but I believe that in the light of what most of the commentators say, the second picture would be something like this. The ship has now come to a point where it is opposite the harbor entrance and the landing point that will lead into a country or a continent concerning which the writer proceeds to speak under other metaphors in this remarkable epistle. In this very context, he speaks of it as a so great salvation.

That's one way of speaking about it. Later on, he will speak about it as being within the veil. That speaks of intimate spiritual intercourse with God.

Not a veil between. Of coming close up to the almighty God of the universe and being able to hold converse and communion with him. And he uses various metaphors, various images, but right here, he's talking about the way in.

And continuing with this image, this nautical image of individuals as a ship on voyage, they've now come to the place where it is possible, if they will, by the grace of God, it is possible here, at this point, if they move in this direction, it is possible to enter into the country, to step onto the continent of Christian salvation and to move into an ever larger experience of the grace and the power and the mercy of God, if they follow the teaching that has been given them. Then there is another picture in his mind. He sees that possibility.

The ships are there on the high seas. They're supposed to be going somewhere. There is the harbor and the point of entry, but he discerns an unseen current.

Whether the people in the ships, whether the ships, the human ships, are seeing what's happening or not, he sees, he discerns, the writer discerns, an undercurrent carrying them away from that important and only point of entry into salvation. And he sees them now like ships adrift, without any power of their own to move in the direction they ought to go, but he sees them being gradually carried by the tide, gradually being borne away and gradually coming further and further from the one and the only entry, let me repeat, to the continent, into the continent of salvation, drifting, drifting, drifting. Of course, we may laugh.

Drifting is not so important if that which is drifting is just driftwood, if it's only a little bit of flotsam, if it's only an old branch of a tree or a little bit of old furniture that somebody's thrown away. It doesn't matter so much. You can watch it drifting, what does it matter? Let it go with the tide.

But if it's a child, if it's a man or a woman made after God's image with eternity in his heart, in his soul, then it's all so different. For an immortal soul made after the image of God with a capacity to live for all eternity somewhere is drifting and in danger of passing the only place of entry into that within the veil. Then that is very serious.

A peril perceived. A ship. A drift.

A human vessel. I wonder whether that could be a picture of some of us tonight. I wonder.

May God grant us to know if that is the case, to come to ourselves and to recognize it and by the grace of Almighty God to be able to turn around and steer the ship into the place of refuge provided by God and into the beginnings of an experience of life everlasting with Him. We ought to take the more earnest keys, says one of the translations, of the things which we have seen and heard, particularly the things we've heard, lest we should slip beyond their reach. Now the second thing that we notice here is the plea that is addressed.

The plea, and it is here, is it not? You can hear this. This writer is more emotional here than he is in many places in this great epistle. I don't think he was a very emotional person.

But even here, actually, it's the intellectual that predominates. But you can hear a sense of peril here. He's in anguish here.

You see, he's afraid that these people are going to be lost. And so you can sense that. I simply cannot read this passage without overhearing the grim undertones of a siren warning of danger.

Or, more accurately, of course, it is not so much the wail of an impersonal mechanism, a siren or a foghorn or some electric alarm system. No, no, not at all. It's rather the cry of a faithful friend who can see what others can't.

And out of the faithfulness of his soul and the compassion of his spirit he cries, Warning! Be careful! You're passing the point of entry into God's so great salvation. Be careful. It is true that the rational predominates, as I've said, because he bids them to pay more attention, to come and think seriously.

That's the invitation. But under all that, behind all that, beneath all that, is this great compassion of his, this great concern of his. The writer of this letter shares, I believe, the very same compassionate concern as his divine Lord on an earlier occasion, you remember.

And in not altogether dissimilar circumstances. Matthew and Luke record the agonizing cry of our Lord Jesus over the city of Jerusalem. Jesus discerned that whatever he said, whatever he did, there was nothing anymore that would persuade those dear people, the ancient Jews of ancient Jerusalem, there was nothing in the whole wide world that even the incarnate Lord could do to persuade them that he was the Son of God, the Messiah.

They would not believe. And so, these two evangelists record this amazing prayer of his. Oh, Jerusalem, this cry of his, I should say.

Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Are you not willing? Look, your house is left to you desolate.

For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. There are some evident similarities between those two incidents and between the pleading voices in both cases, but there is one evident difference. There in ancient Jerusalem, they've crossed the line of no return.

The people addressed by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews had not yet crossed that line, it seems. There was still the possibility, there was still the hope that they would return and draw near against the current and enter through the harbor into the salvation that God had made possible in Christ Jesus. And here, he pleads with them, and he does so primarily in asking them to think.

Look at the burden of his message. He reminds them in the first place of some lessons from the past. Look at verse 2. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment... Now, that's enough for a moment.

Let's just look at that. The ancient Christian Jewish community addressed here would know exactly what he was referring to. We must know likewise in order to appreciate the thrust of his message.

The primary reference here is to the giving of the law to ancient Israel. God's mind was made known to the ancient people through the prophets, as we read in chapter 1 here, but especially through the law. And there are indications in both the Old and the New Testaments that angels somehow or other had a share in the mediation, in mediating the word of the eternal law to man through Moses.

Somehow or other, the Old Testament and the New indicate that angels were involved there somewhere. Now, it doesn't matter where. We just take it as a general reference.

Angels were involved somewhere, so that it is right to say that the law was mediated through angels. They had a share in it. The reference to angels is most natural in this passage, because you remember, as I read from chapter 1, the writer there has gathered together all kinds of scriptures from various parts of the Old Testament to prove one thing.

To prove that the Son, in and through whom God has spoken in these last days, was infinitely higher and greater than all the angels put together, and than any human creature, angelic or human. The Son was infinitely greater than anyone, anywhere, anytime. Now, he says, if the word spoken through angels was so steadfast, that's the word that is used, so abiding, so unmovable, you couldn't change it, you couldn't get rid of it, you couldn't gloss over it, you couldn't jump over it, you couldn't avoid it without consequences.

If the word spoken by angels was a word and you broke it, you were inevitably punished by consequences that corresponded. Then, and this is the thrust of the whole thing, how much sorer will be the accountability and the punishment due to those who neglect not the word that God has spoken through angels, but through his infinitely greater Son. The late Bishop Westcott describes this passage about the law here by telling us, by saying, or by writing words to this effect.

He says, there is a self-executing power in the law. You turn back to the law of the Old Testament and it has a self-executing power. You break it, you don't really break it, it breaks you.

You break yourself, to be more accurately. When you disobey the word of God, when you disobey the law that was mediated even through angels and the man Moses, when you disobey the law of God, you literally break yourself. And there is no need for any human being to come in to do anything.

God sees to it all. It just happens by the divine ordinance. Because God is just.

Whether it happens immediately or ultimately is neither here nor there. You read in the Old Testament, book of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and other books there, you read of how the law of God was often applied immediately and men and women were punished there and then for their sins. That doesn't always happen.

God has appointed a day of judgment. Many of us escape judgment in this world. God delays the consequences of His just retribution.

But we cannot escape it. It is involved in the law, says this writer. There is a self-executing power in it.

And sooner or later, the day will come when it will catch up with us, even though God only spoke the law through angels and Moses, though Moses is not mentioned here. Now then, immediately afterwards, the writer goes on to relate that fact to the realities of the present, as far as these Hebrew professing Christians were concerned, and I believe as far as you and I are concerned. If the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? The salvation of which the New Testament declares is such an immense, such a majestic, such a glorious phenomenon, there is nothing to compare with it.

Its architect was none other than the Almighty God Himself. And the one who made it possible was none other than God's own and co-equal Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of the Old Testament, the servant of Jehovah become flesh, God incarnate. There could be no greater.

And the Lord incarnate did not only live the perfect life, He died an atoning death for sin. He died in the place of sinners. He took the sins of men upon Himself, and He, the greatest of all beings, died the death that was due to transgressors.

Not only that, He Himself preached the message that through Him and His death, men might be forgiven and come to God and be His children and His redeemed. He preached it. He declared it.

And He ordained others to go into all the world and declare the same message. Neither is that all. When the disciples went forth to preach that message, He, the Lord Jesus, in fellowship with the Father, sent forth the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the fact that the disciples who were preaching this message were preaching a divine message.

You often ask, or some people often ask, why is it that we encounter so many miracles in the New Testament that we don't meet today? Now, there may be many parts to the answer that ought to be given to that question. But one aspect of it is this. There, way back there, way back in the New Testament times, it was necessary for men and women to see that the Word given by the Lord Jesus to His disciples to declare to the nations was indeed the Word of God.

That the Gospel was really the Gospel as conveyed by the Lord, conveyed by the Son of God to His disciples. That they hadn't added to it or taken away from it. That it was the authoritative Gospel of God to sinners.

And how could that be done? Well, there were gifts of the Holy Spirit. There were all kinds of things that went on. The Holy Spirit evidently imparted gifts.

And there were signs and there were wonders which manifestly indicated that these men were in the hand of God. And their message was the message that God had given them. They were not liars.

They were not fabricators. They were not dreamers. God was with them, you see.

Now, can you see the point? If the Word spoken by angels was such that every transgression received a just recompense of reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? It originated in God. It was made possible by God's Son. It is confirmed by God the Holy Spirit.

It is eternal. It brings men and women into fellowship with the living God Himself. And the half has not been said.

I can't speak of it all tonight. But you see the thrust. How can we escape if we neglect, if we allow ourselves to drift past the entry into the harbor that leads into this continent of experience? Now, can you answer that question? If you can't answer that question, there is something that you as an intelligent creature will want to do tonight.

If you say, well, I know how to escape. I can escape the consequences of drifting along and paying no heed to the gospel. I can escape the consequences.

I know some way out. Well, all right, if you are sure that there is a way out, carry on. But if you have no answer to the question of this writer, then, my friend, before you leave this sanctuary, you need to give them more earnest heed to the things you've heard.

Lest in slipping away from them, you will not be able to turn your back around, for the tide will be so completely against you, that you'll never find harbor again. Oh, this is a serious message, this. You see, it is so true, isn't it? You and I are being influenced by unseen tides and currents of thought and influence.

Some of them very pagan. I was thinking of some of them as my colleague Mr. McLeod was speaking this morning about secularism. We are being influenced, whether we like it or not, by our newspapers, by everything we hear with our ears and see with our eyes.

We are being influenced, and there's a tide that is taking us away from what God has done and said in His co-equal Son, and confirmed by His co-equal Spirit. And yet we think we'll get away with it. One is grateful for the learning and the institutions of learning in our day.

But you know, in many, many institutions of learning, that which is taught seems only to enable man to drift further away from God. And the knowledge that is purveyed is very rarely a knowledge that makes known the Creator, the Lord, the Savior of man. One of our contemporary preachers has highlighted this tragedy by referring to Gerald Kennedy's report of this startling experience of a man who visited the Bell Laboratories.

Let me read this to you. On the desk of one of the executives of the Bell Laboratories, this visitor saw a machine that truly represents the end of the line. It was a small wooden casket, the size of a cigar box, with a single switch on the side.

When you flip the switch, there's a buzzing sound, and the lid slowly rises so that a hand can emerge. The hand reaches down, turns off the switch, and then goes back into the box. The lid then comes down, and the buzzing ceases.

That's all there is to it. A machine that does nothing but switch itself off. Men and women, that might be laughable were it not for the tragedy that secular knowledge in our world today is doing precisely that.

It is providing knowledge for mankind to switch itself off. Millions of our students on our campuses are taking their own lives. The percentage is larger among them than among any other community.

Many others are just switching themselves off from God, and they are left with a night to which there is no star. Charles Wesley, in two rather unfamiliar stanzas, provides what may well be the pattern for us as we conclude our evening's meditation. I'm not familiar with these, but a dear friend of mine, with whom I once worked very closely, discovered them somewhere in Wesley's books.

And here they are. He was so steeped in scripture too. Loosed from my God, says Charles Wesley, and far removed.

Long have I wandered to and fro, On earth in endless circles roved, Nor found whereon to rest below. Back to my God, at last I fly, For all the waters still are high. Fill with inviolable peace, Establish and keep my settled heart.

In Thee may all my wandering cease, From Thee no more may I depart. Thy utmost goodness called to prove, Loved with an everlasting love. Will you join him? Wanderer, drifter, turn, come into the harbor which God has provided for men and women like you and myself.

This is the day of salvation. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we bless you for the occasion that brings us together, this being the Lord's Day.

The day on which our Lord Jesus rose from the dead when he had finished the work of salvation, and thus the day on which his great salvation, planned by yourself, rendered possible by him, was sealed with a heavenly seal. This is the day. And tonight, our Father, we pray that those of us gathered here may not only be solemnized by the sentiments of this inspired writer to the Hebrews, but, O God, that we may be constrained by your word through him to take the more earnest heed and make our penitent way to your feet.

In Christ, your Son, we ask it in his holy name. Amen.

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