

PAYING ATTENTION TO JESUS



Hebrews 2:1-4

Fourth Message

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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

It is Labor Day weekend, the traditional end to summer. But with our scorching temperatures, it feels like the height of summer. Labor Day is also the traditional end of the summer break and the start of a new school year. But most students have been back in class for a couple of weeks already. Both teachers and parents hope that these students are transitioning back to paying attention in class. They might impress on them the seriousness of what they're doing: "You must pay the most careful attention to what you hear, or else..." An exhortation to listen and a warning of the consequences for not doing so. A carrot and a stick. The carrot: the prospect of future reward. The college of your choice, the possibility of a scholarship. The stick: or else, the dire consequences of not paying attention. You'll fail the test, your grades will suffer, and you won't get into your choice of school. Our students, especially in the Bay Area, are under enormous pressure to perform. You, their parents, are also under great pressure for them.

Students face great challenges. It can be difficult to pay attention in class. Kids have spent their summer on their phones: on social media or playing video games. Now they have to adjust to spending each day without them. Many schools have cell phone policies, not allowing them in class. If students do bring them to school, the phones have to stay in their lockers all day. All this to prevent distraction in class, and enhance the likelihood that the students might pay attention. Many students struggle with ADHD; they struggle to pay attention and maintain focus. Students wonder whether they even need to pay attention. "Will it be on the test?" they ask the teacher. If not, why bother paying attention?

The best teachers inspire their students to pay attention, whether or not a particular topic will be on the test. They make their classes interesting. They keep their students engaged.

Three weeks ago I closed my first sermon on Hebrews with the collect for the Second Sunday of Advent from the *Book of Common Prayer*. It begins: "Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them..."

This is the hope of every teacher: that the students will hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. "Mark" here means to observe and take notice of, as in the phrase "mark my words." I grew up with this phrase, "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." It is well-known in the UK, where the English language has been shaped by Shakespeare, the King James Version, and the Prayer Book.

Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. This is what every teacher wants of his or her students. It is what the preacher wants of his or her listeners. It is what I hope of you. And it is what the author of the Book of Hebrews wants of his readers. His work is best heard as a sermon. He wants his listeners to pay attention: to the sermon, to the Lord Jesus Christ about whom he speaks, and to their own lives. He periodically warns of the dangers in not doing so. These are the so-called "warning passages" of Hebrews. We come to the first such passage today.

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a 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 by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (Heb 2:1-4 NIV)

This is essentially another very long, skillfully-written sentence, comparable in length to the opening sentence (1:1-4). It breaks readily into three parts, though NIV divides it into four sentences.

I. Paying attention to Jesus (2:1)

Therefore... What is the therefore there for? In light of everything we heard in chapter 1, the preacher now transitions to application. Therefore, we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard. So, what have we heard?

We have heard that God spoke in the past to ancient Israel, and that he has now spoken definitively in his Son (1:1-2a). We have heard seven statements showing the excellence of the Son (1:2b-4). We have heard seven quotations from Israel's Scriptures showing how the word God spoke in the past is fulfilled in the word he has spoken in his Son (1:5-13). And the preacher has finished with a reference to us: those who will inherit salvation (1:14b).

Inheritance is mentioned three times in chapter 1. God has appointed the Son *heir* of all things (1:2b). The entire creation will come under his rule. At his enthronement the Son has *inherited* a superior name as true heir to David's throne (1:4). God intends that we also be heirs: *heirs* of salvation (1:14b). Salvation is something that we will inherit. Coming into this inheritance is yet future. Coming into possession of the inheritance requires faithfully finishing the journey, following Christ who has gone before us as our forerunner, our pioneer.

Meanwhile, we must keep paying attention to what we have heard. What we have heard is Jesus. The preacher has expounded the greatness of the Son. He has set Christ before us in his excellence and glory. He has lifted up to our gaze the risen, ascended and enthroned Lord Jesus Christ. This is his carrot, as it were: to place Christ before us in all his beauty. He also has a stick, a warning: "lest we drift away." The preacher will alternate back and forth throughout his sermon: on the one hand, expounding the excellence of Christ, and, on the other hand, exhorting his hearers to continue to pay attention to Christ, with warnings about the consequences for failure to do so. He expounds Christ not as abstract theology, but to place Christ before us in such a way that we are inspired to follow him. So that we are overwhelmed with his excellence and beauty, respond to him in appreciation and love, and follow him whom we love.

We pay attention to what we love. We love what we pay attention

to. The preacher is determined that this be Christ. Christ whom we pay attention to, Christ whom we love, Christ whom we follow. He is determined that it be Christ before us.

The warning is “lest we drift away.” If we don’t keep paying attention to Jesus we will drift away from him. Some people do commit outright apostasy. They renounce Christ. But the more common danger is a slow drift away from Jesus. Imperceptible at first and therefore not alarming. The once-burning heart slowly cools. Less and less attention is paid to Jesus. Other things become more important. This is what happened to the church in Ephesus, to whom the risen Jesus says, “You have forsaken the love you had at first” (Rev 2:4). Their love for Jesus and for one another had chilled.

One can continue paying attention but to the wrong things. These may sound quite noble and spiritual. They might have a veneer of Christian activity. But it is not Jesus that is the focus of attention. To the church in Sardis Jesus said, “you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev 3:1). One might have seen much activity in Sardis but little attention to Jesus himself. It is easy for Christians and churches to pay primary attention to things other than Christ. They have drifted away from Jesus himself. Eventually the drift may lead to a complete loss of connection to Jesus. This is what happened in the church in Laodicea, where Jesus was shut outside the door.

How do we keep paying attention to Jesus? One way is to gather together regularly. We gather on Sundays to pay attention to the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On our handout each Sunday are these words about why we gather. Let us read them together:

We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Our desire is to praise God and receive afresh his Spirit in us, to affirm that we are family reconciled one to another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.

We have used these words on the handout every week since 2014. They go back to a short three-part sermon series I preached in 2012.¹

We gather in worship. We draw near to God, as the preacher later urges (10:22). We re-orient ourselves, because we have all become disoriented through the week. Our attention has been drawn elsewhere. We gather and we turn to pay attention to God in Christ through his Spirit. We pay attention in song, in prayer, in the reading and exposition of the Scriptures. We see Jesus, high and lifted up, seated on the throne, just as Isaiah saw the Lord. And, like Isaiah, we bow in worship. We draw near, we pay attention, we reverse the drift.

We gather to remind ourselves. We hear afresh, and we pay careful attention to what we have heard. We refresh our memory, our understanding of who God is, what he has done, and what he is continuing to do. We refresh our memory of who we are in light of that. Who we are in all our relationships: with God, with one another, and with the world. We pay attention vertically and we pay attention horizontally.

We do this regularly, weekly. Because we need to. We reorient ourselves because we have all drifted during the week, however slightly, however imperceptibly. Some of the Hebrews had given up meeting together. The preacher urges them not to do so (10:25). They needed to keep meeting. So do we. And not just on Sunday. There are opportunities throughout the week to meet together in various connection groups.

Are you drawing nearer to God today? Are you stationary? Or are you slowly drifting away? The preacher places Christ before us, and urges us to pay attention to him.

We are what we love. We become like what we look at. We are formed by what we pay attention to. The best thing to pay attention to is Christ. As we do so we are formed into Christ. This is God’s goal for us, that we become Christ-like, like his beloved Son.

“We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.”

2. Warning from past history

Our preacher continues with a solemn warning from history:

For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? (2:2-3a)

The message spoken through angels was the Torah, the Law that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai. That word was legally binding; God and his people entered into covenant with one another. Moses read the Book of the Covenant to the people, and the people confidently responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey (hear/listen)” (Exod 24:7). The agreement was sealed with the blood of sacrificial animals: the blood of the covenant.

But within forty days that generation had broken the covenant by worshiping the golden calf. They continued to rebel against God, the one who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Their violation and disobedience received its just punishment. They wandered in the wilderness until they all died. They failed to enter God’s rest because they failed to pay attention to what they had heard: the voice of God through the prophet Moses. Our preacher will expound this failure more fully in chapters 3–4.

This disobedience, this failure to hear and heed God’s word, was repeated by Israel after it entered the land. Eventually Israel received its due punishment: exile from the land. Why? Again, a failure to hear. A failure to pay careful attention to what God had spoken. They had heard, but they hadn’t heard. They knew the commandments, but they failed to heed God’s word. Just like Adam had heard but not heard. Adam and Eve listened to another voice. They were exiled from the garden. Israel was exiled from the land. All for failing to pay attention to what they had heard.

Now God has spoken a much greater word in the Son. How much more is it the case, then, that failure to hear this greater word will bring greater negative consequences. How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? We ignore or neglect something when we cease to care about it. We disregard something when we cease to pay attention to it.

Again, how do we counteract this? How do we ensure that we continue to care about this great salvation? By reminding ourselves of this greater word that God has spoken in his Son. By paying most careful attention to it. So that we remain faithful in the journey as we travel together. And at the end of the journey we shall enter God’s promised rest. We shall enter into our inheritance.

3. Supremacy of the word of salvation

God has spoken in his Son. The Son has made purification for sins, and has sat down at God’s right hand. He has accomplished redemption. So great a salvation!

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was con-

firmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (2:3b-4)

Our preacher now makes three points about this great salvation. It was spoken by the Lord, it was confirmed by those who first heard, and it was validated by God. His aim is to show us the reliability of this word of salvation, so that we will pay attention. This word of salvation is well-attested.

3.1 Announced by the Lord

This salvation was first announced by the Lord. Again the Lord here is Jesus. The former word was spoken through angels. This greater word has been spoken through the Lord. It is therefore so much greater. Jesus announced the good news, that the kingdom of God had arrived: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 4:17). The good news was announced in his death, resurrection and ascension. He provided purification for sins, and sat down at the right hand of God in heaven (1:3). His earthly, high-priestly ministry of purification for sins is complete. So great a salvation!

3.2 Confirmed by the first hearers

Secondly, this word of salvation was confirmed to us by those who heard. Neither the preacher nor his audience are in the first generation that heard. They were not eyewitnesses to Jesus. But the word spread. At Pentecost many Jews, visiting Jerusalem for the festival, heard and believed, then returned home with the good news. After the death of Stephen the believers in Jerusalem were scattered. They took the word to Judea, to Samaria, to Antioch, even to Rome. In fulfillment of Jesus’s word, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And so the word came to this community, the community of the preacher and his audience. They heard, they received what they had heard, and they believed. They began following Jesus.

The author to the Hebrews was not a first-generation believer. He heard from those who had heard. This is one of several reasons why Paul cannot be the author. Paul heard directly from the Lord who met him on the Damascus Road. We know neither the author nor the recipients, nor where either was located. But this did not prevent the early church accepting this book as canonical, as part of authoritative Scripture. We can be profoundly grateful that we have this book as Scripture.

We see here an intergenerational transfer: from those who first heard the Lord to those who in turn heard them. And so down through multiple generations until today. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Those who have heard, and passed on to us what they have heard. Paul wrote to Timothy, his spiritual son: “the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2). That is four generations: Paul to Timothy to Timothy’s disciples and to their disciples. Hearing and passing on what they have heard. And so it has continued until this day. Generation after generation learning about Jesus from those ahead of them, then turning around and teaching those who are following them. This is tradition, which literally means a handing over. A handing over from one generation to the next. Tradition often has a bad reputation, as being old and stuffy. But tradition is a positive thing. The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously distinguished: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead

faith of the living.”

What we receive and pass on is now written in the Christian Scriptures, in the New Testament, in addition to Israel’s Scriptures. We hear the holy Scriptures. We read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. As we absorb them, God through his Spirit shapes us into the likeness of Christ. We are formed as we pay attention to Jesus. Then, as we become the older generation, we transition to passing on to the next generation.

Earlier in the service we heard from Todd Poulter. He and Karla joined Wycliffe over 40 years ago to be Bible translators, so that others could hear and read the Scriptures in their own mother tongue. Todd was soon moved into leadership, first within Wycliffe, then in fostering cooperation between multiple Bible agencies. For the last many years he has focused on passing on to the next generation of leaders. And he has been paying attention to Jesus. These two have come together in his first book, published just 8 weeks ago: *Learning to Lead at the Feet of Jesus*.²

3.3 Validated by God

Thirdly, this word of salvation was validated by God himself. God gave supporting testimony, supplementing the Lord’s proclamation and the passing on of the word of salvation. What was this supporting testimony? The first instrument used by God was signs and wonders and various miracles. These are extraordinary events, things outside ordinary experience. They indicate that God is at work. This was so at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. God performed signs, wonders and miracles. He sent a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. He parted the waters of the Red Sea. He provided water and manna and quail; food and drink in the barren wilderness. All of these were supernatural events, explainable only as God at work. God was evidencing his presence in the Exodus.

God was present in Jesus, who performed signs and wonders and miracles. Jesus stilled the storm, he restored sight to the blind, mobility to the lame. “Who is this man that even the winds and the waves obey him?” the disciples in the boat asked (Matt 8:27). The miracles indicated the presence of God, validating the word of Jesus. In his Pentecost sermon Peter told the crowd: “Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22). The signs, wonders and miracles corroborated, endorsed, confirmed, and attested to the word proclaimed by the Lord and received by those who heard. They were not an end in themselves. They were in support of the word, authenticating it.

After Pentecost the apostles proclaimed the gospel, the word of salvation, and God “confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3). Again, the purpose of the signs and wonders was God’s confirmation of the word of salvation that had been proclaimed by Jesus and now by the apostles.

Do signs, wonders and miracles still occur today? Plenty of churches pay a lot of attention to these things. But I think for many of them the purpose is not the same. The signs and wonders become an end in themselves, rather than evidence that God is validating the word of salvation that is proclaimed. But I have read and heard enough missionary stories to believe that signs, wonders and miracles do take place on the mission field where the gospel is proclaimed in new territory. Especially so in Fear-Power cultures, where such mighty acts are rightly understood as manifestations of divine power to authenticate the word spoken by humans.

There is a second instrument that God uses to validate the word

of salvation: “gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” It is God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to us that enables us to hear, receive, and respond to the word of salvation. And to each one who does respond, God gives gifts from the Spirit: spiritual gifts. He distributes these according to his will, not ours. He chooses which gifts to give to whom. He does so in a way that all the necessary gifts are present in a community. These spiritual gifts are further manifestation of God’s confirming testimony.

A further gift of the Spirit is our own spiritual transformation as we receive the word of salvation, embrace it, and begin to follow Jesus. As we pay attention to Jesus, Christ before us, we are changed into his likeness. We become more and more like Jesus, through the Spirit. As we become like Jesus we manifest the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience or forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). This transformation in the lives of those following Jesus is itself powerful testimony to the word of salvation.

In our Scripture reading, Eph 1:3-14, we heard about this great salvation that we have received from God in Christ Jesus through his Spirit. The Holy Spirit, present in us now, is the down payment, the deposit, the pledge, of our inheritance until obtaining full possession. Until we obtain our blessed hope. God’s Spirit is with us as we continue our journey towards God’s rest. God’s empowering presence within us authenticates the word of salvation.

Notice that this three-fold testimony is Trinitarian: spoken in the beginning by the Lord, that is Jesus; validated by God; and further

evidenced by the gift of the Spirit. God is at work in us in Christ through his Spirit.

I started with the first half of the Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, in which we ask God’s help to pay attention to Scripture. The second half expresses the purpose: so that we may hold fast to the blessed hope. So that we might persevere in our journey of faith until we reach our destination. So that we might press on until taking possession of the full inheritance. Meanwhile we pay attention to what we have heard, and we follow Jesus faithfully.

I close with the full Collect:

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Bernard Bell, “Embracing Relationships,” three sermons preached at PBCC, September 2012: 1. Embraced by God; 2. Embracing One Another; 3. Embracing the World?

2. Todd Poulter, *Learning to Lead at the Feet of Jesus: Encounters with Grace and Truth* (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2022).

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