

Hebrews 1:4-2:4 “Pay Attention!”

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Preacher: Will Spink

- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- ! Last week we started a series in the book of Hebrews. We were reminded that God speaks to us.
- That God speaks to us. And through His glorious Son, Jesus, the one who is immeasurably great, so that we would turn our eyes upon Him.
- So we would fix our eyes on Jesus. And as the writer continues this written sermon to the Hebrews today, he does two things that we're going to notice, okay?
- First, he begins a comparison. It's going to continue in many ways through the whole book. But he says Jesus is not just great. He's greater than, in this case, angels.
- [1 : 04] That's the first thing. And then secondly, so helpfully, especially if you're like, so what? He's going to tell us so what. He's going to tell us why that matters to us by giving us one of the most sobering warnings and one of the most hopeful warnings in all the Bible.
- We're going to read the passage as we go this morning. I think it will help us to follow the thought better as the writer quotes a lot of Old Testament scriptures. But first, let's talk about angels for a couple minutes.
- When I was a kid, way back in the 1900s, as I'm often reminded, most Americans believed in angels.
- And they were all over the place in popular culture, if you looked for them, even in the outfield, helping their teams win the game, right? What a great movie.
- Or even making dreams come true for those who got touched by an angel. That ran for many seasons. For many people who said they believed in angels, though it was this sort of cartoonish, tender, childlike figures, you know, with wings and harps on clouds.
- [2 : 28] That's what came to mind for many people when you talked about angels. And perhaps that's part of why, in an increasingly naturalistic culture that we live in, fewer of us these days believe that angels are real.
- The Bible presents angels as real and as much more fearful and intimidating than tender and cuddly.
- Billy Graham popularized the story, so you may have heard it, of Pastor John and Mary Payton. 19th century Scottish missionaries to the New Hebrides.
- They were there one night. They realized a local tribe had surrounded the two of them in their mission headquarters. And so they began desperately to pray.
- They had heard this tribe had gathered with the intent to burn the headquarters and kill them inside it. They prayed and prayed through the night. And when morning came, they went out and discovered the tribe was gone.
- [3 : 38] It was about a year later that the chief of the tribe had become a Christian and was talking one day with John. And Payton asked him about that night and what kept them from carrying out their murderous mission.

And the chief said that they couldn't attack because of the army of men in shining garments, withdrawn swords who were all around the headquarters that night.

That's a description in stories across continents and different contexts with remarkably similar shining warriors stopping whole armies, rescuing many people, angels over and over.

It fits with the biblical image of angels who have to start when they encounter someone who's not supposed to be afraid of them. What do they have to say first? Fear not, right?

They're mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible. Angels are created spirits. Both of those are important. They're created spirits, not flesh and blood, people like us.

[4 : 50] Although they can appear in human form, the Bible says. They are messengers. That's actually what the word means in Hebrew and in Greek. Messengers of God.

Like the ones we may think of first announcing the birth of Jesus, right? To Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds. Lots of angels around Christmas. In fact, hosts of angels.

Thousands upon thousands the Bible references. Not nearly so rare as we sometimes think. I mean, just think of Elisha's servant, right? He doesn't know anything about angels.

And all of a sudden, his eyes are opened and he sees the spiritual reality around him. He is surrounded by angels and chariots of fire. Although some angels are fallen and work against the purposes of God, they were created by God to serve God, to serve his people.

Like the time they minister to Jesus after his temptation or free Peter from prison, right? But if some in our day have too low a view of angels, in the time of the Scripture, Jesus' day, some had too high a view.

[6 : 05] Some Jews at the time had begun worshiping angels. I mean, after all, angels were considered the ones that delivered God's law to his people through Moses.

They were key to God's purposes, second only to God in importance and power. So if the writer of this letter wants to talk about the greatness of Jesus, a great place to start is demonstrating that he outranks the angels.

And he especially wants to do that by using the Old Testament to make his case so that these Jewish Christian converts will be assured that they're bowing to the right king, that their worship is aimed in the right direction.

Notice how he compares, but mostly contrasts, Jesus with angels. Angels are good, but Jesus is great.

Let's start reading where the sentence begins in the middle of verse 3. After making purification for sins, he, Jesus, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

[7 : 37] Jesus, the one who reigns at the Father's right hand, is superior to the angels in his very essence. That's what name meant.

It could be his name referring to the fact that Jesus is called Lord. Certainly that's true. But I think the context indicates the name he has inherited is Son.

Angels are God's servants, but Jesus is God's Son. He turns first to Psalm 2, that great royal psalm that the writer implies is about Jesus.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, You are my Son, today I have begotten you? Only to Jesus, right?

And by the way, in case you're thrown off by language like, Today I have begotten you as Son, or the name that Jesus has inherited, that does not imply that there was a time when Jesus was not God's Son.

- [8 : 50] Neither of those is saying that. It's actually referring to the day of Jesus' resurrection and his exaltation to God's right hand when he was declared powerfully and publicly to be God's Son.
- It would be very similar in the culture of Hebrews to a coming-of-age declaration where a father would publicly declare, This is my Son!
- Not at all implying that he hadn't been for the previous 13 years or whatever. Just that this was a moment where that came to fruition publicly.
- Further to this point of Jesus' name as Son, the writer references the promises to King David in 2 Samuel 7. Or again, I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son, right?
- The King, the Davidic heir, Messiah, God's Son, right? This is something never referred to an angel. Never a position that an angel holds.
- [10 : 05] Connected to this first distinction, another important contrast is that angels worship while Jesus receives worship.
- Verse 6, quoting from the Greek of Psalm 97 or Deuteronomy 32, and again, when he brings the firstborn, the Son, into the world, he says, Let all God's angels worship him.
- You know what happens when people bow down to angels in the Bible? What immediately happens next? Angel says, Stand up. You're confused.
- Don't worship me. You know what happens when people bow down to Jesus in the Bible? Now, that happens never. He allows it. He doesn't tell them to quit.
- Angels worship at Jesus' birth. We know that. Glory to God. But they worship Jesus as God throughout the Bible, especially in heaven, Revelation tells us.
- [11 : 09] Similarly, angels are created and commanded. While Jesus creates and commands. Look, angels are really important, right?
- Verse 7 from Psalm 104. This is a compliment, right? Of the angels, he says, He makes his angels winds and his ministers a flame of fire.
- Angels move quickly and powerfully in all sorts of places. But, even better than that, verse 8 from Psalm 45, But of the Son, he says, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
- The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.
- Keep going, Psalm 102. And you, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning. And the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain.
- [12 : 13] They will all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up. Like a garment, they will be changed. But you are the same. And your years will have no end.
- Jesus, you're the creator from the beginning, laying the foundations of the earth. But the one who nonetheless outlasts anything in creation that wears out.
- Right? You ever worn a garment out? You just, holes in it, you can't wear it anymore? Jesus doesn't wear out. He's faithful. You can count on it.
- He's not changing. And he's directing it all, right? Angels included. He made it, and he directs it for his purposes. Angels have the power of wind and fire.
- That's very powerful. It's amazing, right? Jesus invented wind and fire. And he directs them.
- [13 : 17] By the word of his power, wind goes and fire appears. Mic drop. No comparison. One more before he gets flagged for piling on to the angels here.
- To the beloved and often cited Psalm 110. To which of the angels has God ever said, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?

Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? Jesus is our king.

Right? The one to whom every knee will bow. While angels are our servants. While angels are our servants. There's something right about the cultural experiences, visions we have of angels.

They're powerfully protecting God's people. We've mentioned stories of that. But they're not the ones that are pulling the strings, that are ruling the roost. No, there's one of those.

[14 : 24] The son. See, even the Old Testament shows angels are good. But Jesus is great.

They're not of the same order. Don't get confused, he says. There's really no comparison. Don't bring Jesus down so that you seem more acceptable in the local synagogue of the day.

Because people are getting frustrated with you. Don't bring Jesus down so you keep from attracting attention from Rome. They might be causing you trouble. No, keep him up there.

Jesus, utterly unique. The true king worthy of worship as the long promised, finally revealed son of the most high God.

As the radiance of the glory of God. The exact imprint of his nature. As the one who paid for sins and reigns at God's right hand over every person, every molecule, every power.

[15 : 22] Jesus reigns. That's Hebrews 1. That is some high Christology, right? He's putting Jesus up there.

It's some glorious truth about who he is that no one else compares to. But thus far, only stating truth, right? It's not telling us a single thing to do.

Just telling us who Jesus is. But then we get this really helpful word, therefore. It kicks off chapter 2, right?

Something's turning. This is a sermon, right? Now he's going to tell you why it matters. Listen to the warning that I said is one of the most sobering and hopeful in all the Bible.

I'm going to read it and talk about it for a few minutes. Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

[16 : 24] For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, warning, a few years ago, my family was throwing a frisbee at the beach.

We love to do that. Well, I love to do that and run down the beach. And this time the frisbee went, and I usually catch it, right? Of course. But this time I got thrilled by a wave, knocked me under, my glasses went flying off, the frisbee landed over there somewhere.

By the time I found my glasses, put myself back together, looked around, the frisbee was gone. Later that day, we went for a walk on the beach.

It was a long walk, easily more than a mile down from where we started, and we're walking along the beach, and what do we see? Way out there, washing up on the sand. It's our frisbee.

We weren't even close to this. How did it get down? You know what happened? That frisbee decided that it hated me and wanted to run as far away from me as possible. Is that what happened? That's not what happened.

[17 : 43] What happened? What did the frisbee do? Nothing. It had done nothing, and yet it had drifted far away.

Drifting happens to ships, too, right? When the anchor is not held securely, the winds might blow your boat anywhere, just because it's sitting there. Drifting happens to people, too, doesn't it?

Not only in the ocean when the tide is strong and you've just been relaxing, and all of a sudden you look back up to the shore and realize you can't find your umbrella anywhere. It happens when you're listening to your wife.

She's sharing something important, but the football game is on in the background, and you find you drift off and don't remember what she just said. Sharing for a friend.

It's important to work those ends sometimes for the sake of other people. It happens in relationships, doesn't it?

[18 : 46] When we drift apart, not because we set out to avoid one another, not because we insisted that we wouldn't talk anymore, but all of a sudden we look up and discover we didn't stay in touch.

We didn't give any attention to one another. And we've drifted apart. See, the danger of drifting is that it happens without your intending for it to happen, and often without your even noticing that it happened.

And yet, you still end up far away. I want to remind you this morning that this warning is to people who are in church.

They're listening to God's word, listening to this very sermon to the Hebrews. They're so associated with the people of God that they may be facing persecution for it, and considering going back to their previous way of life before following Jesus because it's more comfortable.

Y'all, this is a warning. If you are sitting here this morning, it's a warning for you and me. We're prone to wander, aren't we?

[20 : 14] The warning is, pay attention lest you drift away. Pay much closer attention to what you have heard.

What have you heard? You've heard God speaking through his Son. The message of Jesus, the word of God. Pay much closer attention to it lest you drift away from it.

Don't neglect such a great salvation.

Y'all, what do you have to do to neglect something? Nothing. Just like drifting. It's true for most of the people I've talked with over the years who have stopped walking with Jesus, stopped worshiping with his church, stopped following his word.

Most of them did not have this moment of rejecting the claims of Christ. Some of them, yes. Most of them, no. Most of them didn't reject Jesus.

[21 : 24] They neglected Jesus. They drifted away. They didn't embrace heresy. They didn't commit some gross public sin.

They didn't cause an uproar. They didn't do anything. That's all they had to do. They just drifted further and further from Jesus.

Drifting is easy for those of us who are prone to wander, isn't it? It can happen anytime, really. Let me just suggest a few times it may commonly happen in our lives.

Like maybe when you leave home for college. Perhaps there's already been some drifting. Maybe you grew up in church and you were already kind of checking out and just checking the boxes while you're at home.

But you go off to school and so many other things seem important. And old habits and rhythms are broken. And you drift off into new schedules and priorities without paying careful attention to Jesus.

[22 : 38] It happens. Many of us have been there. It happens when you start to focus on your career and your kids.

And especially if this happened at the same time. And suddenly your weekends are full of good things. Your weeks are full of providing for your family.

Your heart is full of ambition. Church for an hour can still happen often enough in that season for many of us.

But Jesus moment by moment, day by day gets distant. I'll be honest. Sometimes the easiest place to drift is in church.

Especially if you've been here a while. Because you can just set the cruise control. And you know how it goes. But in your heart, you're far away from Jesus.

[23 : 32] We can be people who honor him with our lips. And we know how to do it. But our hearts are far from him. Right among his people. Just like the author of Hebrews is saying.

That's who he's talking to. It can also happen later in life. You can drift when your kids leave home. Or when you're thinking about retirement.

And you've done just about everything that the church has for you. I've served in every way possible. Done everything that anybody could ask me to do. And now it's a new season of life. And I'm excitedly making a list of what life's going to be like now.

And all of the things that I'm going to get to do. And the places I'll get to go. And I don't reject Jesus. I just honestly don't feel the same need for him that I used to.

I mean, you've been doing this a long time now. And so you drift away from church. But you've got lots of good friends still you can talk about Jesus with.

[24 : 37] And then you drift away from them. But man, you know how to talk to Jesus by yourself. You and Jesus. Then you eventually just drift away from him too.

Encouraging us to drift away is one of Satan's subtle tactics. C.S. Lewis saw it so much that he put it in the mouth of his senior demon in screw tape letters.

As he's teaching a younger demon how to attack a professing Christian. This is what he says. Do remember the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the enemy.

The enemy in this case is God. It does not matter how small the sins are. Provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the light and out into the nothing.

Indeed the safest road to hell is the gradual one. The gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

[25 : 40] That's drifting, right? The safest road to hell. See, it doesn't matter how you get there as long as you end up far from God, right?

Away from the light. Even or especially if you don't realize that's where you are. This is the whole point of Jesus being greater than angels.

Now we're back to connect that dot. The law of God, the old covenant, his relationship with his people was delivered by angels, right? And if you disobeyed that message, rejected that word, there were consequences.

Like wilderness 40 years. Exile out of the promised land. Defeat in battle. In general, distance from God. Not near Yahweh.

And so, the writer makes an argument from the lesser to the greater. Remember, if God takes it seriously when you ignore what he says through his angels.

[26 : 48] How much more will God take it seriously when you ignore what he says through his son? Remember, he has spoken to us through his son.

How will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? He says, look, see what happened to the Israelites? Who didn't heed the warnings of the angels?

Who didn't cry out to Yahweh as their only hope? Who kind of thought they were okay and just coasted along as pretty decent people? Do you see what happened? No way will we escape if we turn a blind eye, a deaf ear to Jesus.

Warning, Southwood. Warning. That's a sobering warning, isn't it? We'd rather have warned those out there.

And he wants to warn those right here. Lest we drift away from it. How shall we escape if we neglect it?

[27 : 52] I just want to tell you this morning, it's sobering enough that you should stop and ask yourself honestly if you're drifting. If you feel like you're wandering, drifting slowly away from Jesus, if he feels distant, it's a sobering enough warning that you may need a spouse or a friend or a parent or a grace group leader, elder, pastor, to tell you they see drift.

That you can't see. If you're concerned as you read these words, maybe ask someone who loves you.

We'd love to talk. It may sound like a scary question to ask. Hey, do you see drift in my life, in my heart? What do you see? That can be scary to ask someone.

But I want you to know it's actually a really safe question to ask, especially if you've got this passage open. There is not only a warning here in this passage, but also a welcome.

You need to hear that too. It's even more hopeful than the warning is sobering. Listen, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? The great salvation, it was declared at first by the Lord and it was attested to us by those who heard.

[29 : 11] While God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. See, if you're drifting, the solution is not start swimming harder.

Start working your way back against the tide. No, the passage says, pay much closer attention to the message God has spoken through his son.

To what he calls such a great salvation. That the glorious gospel message of our salvation is not swim faster, try harder, perform better.

It's cling desperately to the Savior who has already done those things. What's the salvation declared at first by Jesus, he says? I came to seek and to save the lost.

To give my life as a ransom for many. I am the bread of life. He who believes in me will never hunger. I'm the good shepherd.

[30 : 23] The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Even the wandering ones. The sheep, they hear my voice and they follow me. I am the way and the truth and the life.

Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Welcome home, Jesus says. I'm a beachcombing Savior.

When you're drifting and you're far away, I'm looking for you. I don't just happen upon you. I'm coming out looking for the one who's drifted away.

What a great Savior. What a great salvation. Pay attention. It's the same good news, not just from Jesus, but attested to those eyewitnesses who heard.

They said things like, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul, so we need not drift.

[31 : 31] What a great salvation. Pay attention. In fact, if you haven't heard enough, God himself bore witness to the truth of Jesus' offer, didn't he?

Just think about the things that he did. Blind people are healed. Not because they learned a new technique, but because they cry out to Jesus.

Healed. Hungry people are fed, not because they learned to cook really well, but because Jesus prays and blesses the food.

And dead people walk out of the grave. Not because they learned the secret to life, but because Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

What a great salvation. Pay attention. Pay attention. The command to us to do that is so that we don't drift.

[32 : 34] The command is not to perform better, right? It's not on you. The command is to pay much closer attention to the one who has performed perfectly.

He'll take care of you. He'll change you. He'll make you what you long to be. The word there for paying attention means to obsess over.

Seems almost like a negative thing to us. The writer's saying, here's something you can obsess over. Make Jesus your life's obsession. Don't let Jesus out of your sight.

Don't stop listening to his message. Y'all, the things of this world. A culture that tells you life is found in possessions or power or pleasure.

Even a constant just scroll of mindless distraction. They can grab your attention, can't they? And cause you to miss what you most need to hear.

[33 : 34] Every moment of every day, what you most need to hear is the voice of Jesus. If you drift off and miss a class or movie or a sermon, there will be another one.

But if you miss the salvation provided by Jesus, the relationship that he came to mend, the life he came to give you, there's no other life, friends.

Don't miss him. Pay careful attention, much closer attention to the message of Jesus. Keep Jesus in the foreground.

That is the clear teaching of Scripture. How? What does that look like? Just some ideas, not biblical commands.

Some things that have helped me. You could try one if you like. Very first thing in the morning, read his word and talk to him.

[34 : 40] Very first thing. How do you keep Jesus in the forefront? Do life with friends. They might call themselves a grace group. Who talk about Jesus beyond the meeting.

Keep him in front of you. Memorize Scripture so it's always on your mind. Here's one you'll like. Confess your sin. Spend some time thinking about that.

Focusing on your sin and your struggle. Telling God how you're prone to wander. You know where it's going to lead you? It's going to lead you to the cross of Jesus. In a fresh way, it'll keep him right in front of your mind.

Maybe spend some time this afternoon thinking how the thing in your life that you spend the most time doing. Maybe a job or whatever. How's that part of Jesus' kingdom?

So that as I find myself in it this week, it's making me think of Jesus. Why am I here with Jesus? How's he here with me? Find someone and explain who Jesus is.

[35 : 40] Explain his great salvation to someone who doesn't know him. It'll keep him in front of you. It'll actually make you realize how worthy he is. It'll refresh the joy of your salvation.

Jesus is so worthy of your first, close, constant attention. Just think. It's amazing to hear stories of how angels protect God's people, isn't it?

I just read one. You could read them all day. Many of these happen in our lives and we don't even realize how God's protecting us through his angels. How much more does Jesus protect his people?

How much more does he love us? How much greater is the salvation you get in relationship with him?

It's so great. That he is with us always. Angels, here and there, come and go. Jesus is with us always. This table is here this morning because he wants you to know that.

[36 : 50] He wants you to see how great this salvation is and what a great savior you have. He sat with his disciples the night he knew he was going to be betrayed.

And he took bread and broke it and he gave it to them and said, this is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, after supper, he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Drink from it, all of you. In other words, he said, I know you're sinners. Stay with me and I'm going to take care of it. And he does, doesn't he?

His life, his body, his blood. Whenever you eat this bread, whenever you drink this cup, you proclaim his death until he comes. Jesus joins us for this meal.

[37 : 51] Can you believe that? Jesus joins us by his spirit for this meal so that we will pay close attention to him. He wants to help us with that.

He wants us to be able to cry out because of our great need for him. He wants us to be able to come and rejoice because he has met our needs. He has died, given his life to give us life.

If you see here your great Savior, come and eat with him. If that's not what you see in this bread and wine, if that's not what they mean to you, then I would encourage you this morning, let these elements pass by you.

But don't let another day pass without receiving Jesus, without trusting him, receiving his great salvation.

It is free to you. He gives it to you freely because he has paid it all. Let's pray and we'll come together with him. Jesus, how good you are to make such provision for people like us.

[39 : 01] Who need not only to be rescued, but who need to be rescued again. Who need to be called back. Because our hearts get calloused. Our lives get busy.

And we drift. And we wander. And you've come again this morning to meet with us. That is so kind of you. You are so gracious. Use this to call our hearts back.

We ask in your name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. Thank you.