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Reasons to embrace the gospel

by Scott Grant

Hebrews 2:1-9

Valuable junk

Last year a woman living in Philadelphia spotted what looked like an old helmet in her attic, near the spot where the Halloween costumes used to be. She decided to clean it up, and upon doing so, she wondered if it might be worth something. Perhaps it might be worth as much as \$1,000, she thought. She lugged it downtown, where an appraiser was offering free evaluation of people's antiques. The appraiser informed her that it was a 16th-century cabasset from Milan, Italy, forged from a single sheet of steel and covered with gold. Value: \$250,000.

Who knows how long the helmet had been getting kicked around in the attic until one day, someone decided to take a closer look. When the woman paid closer attention to it, she realized that it was extremely valuable. The gospel, as it comes to us in Jesus Christ, is of inestimable value. But perhaps we treat it like a piece of junk in the attic, unaware of its value while we pursue supposedly more significant endeavors.

The writer's point in Hebrews 2:1-9 is that we must pay close attention to the gospel, this treasure. He says to us, "Listen up!" He jolts us from complacency and apathy in order to get our attention so that our minds will be directed toward the gospel. He gives us two reasons for paying attention: 1) The consequences for disregarding the gospel are tragic. 2) The eternal benefits of embracing it are staggering.

Pay closer attention to the gospel (2:1)

Hebrews 2:1:

(1) For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

In Hebrews 1, the writer spoke of the supremacy of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, using angels as a point of comparison. It is "for this reason," because of the supremacy of the Son, that we must pay attention to the superior message that comes through him. The superiority of the messenger means the message bears close scrutiny. God, through his Son, has spoken this great word to "us" (Hebrews 1:2).

The writer uses nautical terms in this verse. The word translated "pay attention" was used of fastening an anchor. Anchoring a ship, obviously, is what prevents it from "drifting away."

Here, the writer exhorts his readers to pay closer attention to what they have already heard. What is it that they have heard? It is the message that came in God's Son (Hebrews 1:2) and was spoken through the Lord Jesus (Hebrews 2:3). It is the gospel, the message of salvation (Hebrews 1:14, 2:3).

What does "drifting away" mean? The primary application is for people who are in danger of dismissing the gospel despite exposure to it. In a secondary sense, there is application for those who have received the gospel but are in danger of dismissing it as one interest among many.

The writer has a very simple word of exhortation to guard against drifting away. It is this: "Pay attention!" It is a message that will reappear several more times in this great book. This simplifies things, doesn't it? Paying

attention may not be the easiest thing to do, but at least we know what we have to do. We must seek to scrutinize Jesus, to be engaged by him, to have our hearts penetrated and our minds transformed. When all else fails, beg God to show you Jesus, the true Jesus who is that treasure, that pearl of great price. The Holy Spirit, who is called the Spirit of truth, has been given to help us pay attention, to fasten our minds on the truth, to call Jesus Christ to our attention (John 16:7-14).

The writer doesn't disclose a need to discover any new secrets, anything we haven't heard. We just need to pay closer attention to what we already have heard. Perhaps we don't recognize the greatness of what we've heard - the marvelous facets of it that make Jesus Christ irresistible. Perhaps we don't recognize that we have a priceless treasure kicking around in the attics of our minds. But if we picked it up, polished it up a bit and examined it more carefully, we'd realize that a great treasure has been dropped out of heaven for our benefit.

Knowing that paying attention is difficult, the writer gives us two compelling reasons to do so. First, we should pay attention because the consequences for disregarding the gospel are tragic.

Consequences for disregarding the gospel (2:2-4)

Hebrews 2:2-4:

(2) For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, (3) how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, (4) God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will.

Verse 2 begins with the word "for," which means what follows somehow explains what has preceded it. What follows, then, is a reason for paying closer attention.

Again, the writer uses angels as a point of comparison, this time comparing the different messages brought by angels and the Son, whom the writer now calls "the Lord." The word spoken through angels was the covenant that God made with Israel on Mount Sinai, the centerpiece of which was the 10 commandments. In the original account of the giving of the law, the mediation of angels is not recorded, although Deuteronomy 33:2 speaks of their presence. Other New Testament figures speak of the law's being given through angels (Acts 7:54, Galatians 3:19).

That word was "unalterable," or reliable. The evidence for its reliability was the "just recompense" meted out for "every transgression and disobedience," words that imply deliberate disregard for God's word. The word "recompense" means payment of wages. Elsewhere the writer uses it in a positive sense (Hebrews 10:35, 11:26). The stipulated consequences for disregarding God's word demonstrated that the Lord was serious about this covenant - this relationship with his people. He built into the law, his covenant code, a system of prescribed consequences for disobedience so that the people would remain faithful to him, so that they wouldn't destroy themselves.

Why does the writer now use the law as a point of comparison? Many among his readers not only had an exalted view of angels, they had an exalted view of the law and its stipulations. He therefore later tells them that the law is simply a "shadow of the good things to come" (Hebrews 10:1).

Despite the greatness of the law, despite the greatness of God's first covenant, it is overshadowed and superseded by the New Covenant, this "great" salvation that comes to humanity through Jesus Christ. The greater word, then, carries with it an even more certain expectation that a "just recompense" will be meted out to those who permanently neglect it. For those who neglect the salvation offered to them in Jesus Christ, there is "no escape" from this. The writer doesn't expand upon the nature of the consequences, although later

in Hebrews he calls them more "severe" than death (Hebrews 10:29). God's wrath can simply be understood as his giving people what they want - separation from the one to whom they don't want to submit. Paul says God "gave them over" to what they wanted (Romans 1:24).

However else we understand the consequences for dismissing the offer of salvation, the writer makes two things clear in verses 2 and 3. First, the consequences are "just." God is just, and can be trusted to do what is just, or right. The amazing thing in all this is not that there are just consequences for neglecting the gospel but that there is a gospel at all - that anyone at all has the opportunity to avoid receiving just consequences. Second, the consequences the writer speaks of are for those who "neglect" the offer of salvation - for those who have been exposed to it and then dismiss it. They have heard, but they disregard it and drift away from it.

What is this salvation, which the writer describes as "so great a salvation"? Although salvation has past, present and future aspects, the writer here speaks of salvation as in the future. He speaks of those who "will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14), and he speaks of "the world to come" (Hebrews 2:5). It is the future and eternal reign of Jesus Christ over God's new creation.

Salvation, then, in the writer's mind, is entering into the kingdom to come (Hebrews 12:28). What makes it great? It is great because of the greatness of "the author of salvation" (Hebrews 2:10). Up until this point, the writer has done little else but describe the greatness the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Salvation is great because the Savior is great.

The writer then proceeds to tell us that there is ample evidence to believe the gospel. It was first spoken through the Lord, namely, Jesus. The title "Lord" implies that the message is one that should be heeded. Immediately after going public, Jesus began "preaching the gospel of God," inviting people to be part of "the kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14-15). The gospel heralded by the Lord was "confirmed" by those who heard it: the apostles and other contemporaries who became followers of Jesus. That confirmation comes to us in the New Testament, the apostolic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we read the gospel of John, for example, we have an eyewitness account of one who walked with Jesus, heard and saw what he did, and even leaned on his breast (John 21:20-24). The words concerning Jesus in the New Testament are "what we have heard," and we should pay close attention to them.

God himself verified the message by accompanying it with signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The first three words - signs, wonders and miracles - were used in reference to the supernatural acts done through Jesus and the apostles (Acts 2:22, 8:13, 19:11).

A new age was breaking in, one that the prophets predicted would be authenticated by such signs. When John the Baptist began to question whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told John's disciples, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them." Jesus was sending John back to the scriptures, back to Isaiah, who predicted such signs (Isaiah 61:1).

These signs, wonders and miracles, intended to authenticate the gospel, were not capricious demonstrations of power; they were expressions of God's love for people that released them from some sort of affliction. The gospel of salvation was authenticated by mighty acts that saved people from various forms of bondage.

The word "signs" received prominent play in the description of the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 7:3; Deuteronomy 4:34, 6:22, 7:19, 29:2). The signs effected through Jesus and the apostles were signs that a new exodus was upon the people, an exodus from slavery to sin, and ultimately an exodus to the eternal kingdom.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit were given for the sake of the maturity of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12-16), "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7), for "serving one another" (1 Peter 4:10) and that "God may be

glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). The gifts, which also authenticated the gospel, were also intended for the benefit of people.

God, then, authenticated the message by releasing his power to help people. Today perhaps we don't see the volume of signs, wonders and miracles that God unleashed to authenticate the gospel, though we certainly see the gifts of the Holy Spirit in effect. God validated the gospel "with them," or, more literally, "at the same time" as the apostles were preaching the gospel. At the least we see the signs, wonders and miracles of a changed life. We see the supernatural power of the gospel to change a life. God still unleashes his power to help people, to change their condition, to take them to a better place - to show them his love. The gospel today is validated by the miracle of a changed life - a life that gives, a life that loves. So God is not only inviting us to read his word, he's inviting us to read his people. If we see change in his people, if we see growing compassion and tenderness and mercy, that's evidence that the gospel is real, and it is a summons for us to pay closer attention to it.

God bore witness to the gospel "according to his own will." It is his will to authenticate the gospel by helping people, by releasing them from bondage and transforming them into men and women who are growing in their love for him and others. It's something he wants, something he delights in. It's good to know that God's will is thus - that he is for us, that he wants to bring about positive change in our lives and to use it as a testimony.

Brennan Manning tells a story of a man who came to believe the gospel in a Montgomery, Alabama, prison. He began speaking to the man in the cell next to him about the love of Jesus every night, but his neighbor mocked him. The man passed scripture passages to him and shared his goodies with him, whenever his relatives would drop off care packages. The man died of a heart attack. At the funeral service, the prison chaplain spoke of the Easter victory of Jesus when the former neighbor abruptly stood up in the middle of the sermon, pointed to the coffin and said, "That's the only Jesus I ever knew." What he pointed at, what he saw, was a life that had been changed by Jesus Christ, a life that authenticated the gospel. If we read the people of Jesus, we'll see similar validation.

The first reason for paying attention to the gospel is that the consequences for disregarding it are tragic. The second reason for paying attention is that the benefits for embracing it are staggering.

Benefits for embracing the gospel (2:5-9)

Hebrews 2:5-9:

*(5) For he did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking. (6) But one has testified somewhere, saying,
"What is man, that you remember him?
Or the son of man, that you art concerned about him?
(7) You have made him for a little while lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honor,
And have appointed him over the works of your hands;
(8) You have put all things in subjection under his feet."
For in subjecting all things to him, he left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. (9) But we do see him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

Verse 5 begins with the word "for," just as verse 2 did. How does the information that follows this word explain what has preceded it? It supports the writer's exhortation to pay attention, by offering another reason to pay attention. This reason concerns "the world to come," or, more literally, "about to be." The same words are used by the writer in connection with "salvation" that will be inherited (Hebrews 1:14), a future "age"

(6:5) and the "lasting city" (13:14) - all of which are "about to be." It is the world that God will re-create, which will be inhabited by his people.

This world will not be subjected to angels. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, from which the writer quotes in the book of Hebrews, ascribes the boundaries of the people of the present earth as having something to do with angels (Deuteronomy 32:8).

Considering the readers' likely enchantment with angels, perhaps they thought both the present age and the coming age were subject to angels. At any rate, such is not the case. To whom will the world to come be subject? Who will reign over it? To answer that question, the writer, once again, quotes from the Psalms.

He introduces the Psalm with a formula, which he follows elsewhere, that identifies neither the author of the work nor the location of it. For the author's purposes, what's important is the content, particularly, content that speaks of Christ.

Specifically, he quotes from Psalm 8, which describes man's dominion over creation, with echoes from Genesis 1:28, where the first man and woman were commissioned to subdue the earth and rule over it. The psalmist expresses astonishment at this, wondering what it is about man that causes God to favor him so highly. The term "son of man" is a Hebrew expression, at its first level simply a more colorful way to say "man." Man, the peak of God's creation, was then made "for a little while lower than the angels" because of sin, being brought from higher to lower, from immortality to mortality. Nevertheless, God has crowned him with glory and honor, with the Genesis commission to reign over the earth.

But even when Psalm 8 was penned, things weren't going so well, because of sin. Far from subduing the earth and reigning over it, and caring for it and its inhabitants, men and women have wreaked havoc with it and each other. It hasn't exactly been a righteous reign. Therefore, we get the sense that there's more to Psalm 8 than meets the eye. That is exactly the sense the writer of Hebrews conveys. In verse 9, he says that it is the man Jesus who was "made for a little while lower than the angels" and that it is he who was "crowned with glory and honor," phrases that Psalm 8 applied to man in general.

Jesus himself used the title "Son of Man" for himself, a title that took on a broader concept than the one contained in Psalm 8 with the prophet Daniel, who envisioned the Son of Man receiving "dominion, glory and a kingdom" (Daniel 7:13). The writer says in verse 8 that all things, including all of us, have been subjected to Jesus. Nothing we see, no person we meet, is not subject to Jesus.

We might respond along these lines: "It sure doesn't seem that all things are subject to Jesus." The writer responds along the same lines as well, noting, "But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him." What does he mean by this? Jesus is indeed reigning at the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 1:3), sovereign over all creation, but he is not yet exercising full authority. For now he is allowing people to go their own way, to rebel against his authority, though assuredly he has divinely perfect purposes for allowing it. The words "now" and "not yet" are important in this sentence. They let us know that the present arrangement is not permanent, that there is a "world about to be" over which Jesus will exercise full authority.

His emphasis, though, is not what we don't see but what we do see: Jesus. We don't see Jesus exercising full authority, but we do see Jesus in authority, reigning over creation. We see him in the description of him by this and other New Testament writers. His is a distinct reign, one that has been won uniquely. Jesus was "made for a little while lower than the angels" - meaning, he was "made like his brothers" who became temporarily lower than the angels because of sin (Hebrews 2:17). The writer uses the Lord's human name here, Jesus, to emphasize his humanity. He was made like us. He became a man. He came in the flesh, and on the cross he who knew no sin became sin on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:21), becoming less than the angels.

What was his purpose for coming in this manner, from descending from the higher to the lower? It was to

straighten out the mess that we have made of God's creation, principally, the mess we have made of ourselves. Jesus came to make things right. He came to suffer death and thereby be crowned in a way that he wasn't crowned before - as God *and* man. By God's grace, Jesus died for everyone. Jesus died the death that we all deserved, receiving the "just recompense" for our rebellion against God and his word. Such a death - such a death on behalf of others - is surely a glorious and honorable one. Thus Jesus returned to the Father in full glory, as the returning hero, the conquering king.

Because he tasted death for us and reigns now in heaven over creation as both God and man, it is a different kind of reign - a reign that includes us. Jesus, one of us, has gone before us. Jesus, one of us, will return for us, for "those who will inherit salvation," for those who will inhabit "the world about to be," to bring "many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10).

We've made a mess of things. We have created untold misery for ourselves and each other. War, genocide, infanticide, murder, poverty, starvation, rape, child abuse. We long for a world without these things. All of us are born expecting a world governed by peace and justice and righteousness, and all of us have our hopes crushed. Each generation thinks it can come up with the answers to solve the problems, to clean up the mess. Each generation fails. So we pine away for a world that works. There will be such a world, a world "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). It will be such a world, because it will be subject to a righteous king - our God, our Man. Jesus.

Those who follow Jesus will reign with him over this new and glorious world "forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5). And the message of this section of Hebrews is this: "You don't want to miss it."

About a year ago I attended the memorial service of an acquaintance of mine who lived a hard life. As a boy, Jon was struck by a car while crossing the street and was paralyzed. He spent the rest of his days in a wheelchair. As an adult he discovered that he had contracted AIDS from one of the blood transfusions he had received years earlier. A reckless driver robbed Jon of his legs, and a horrible disease robbed him of his life. He died before he reached 30. But he loved Jesus. Many people drew encouragement from his oft-quoted line: "Jesus doesn't make life easy; he just makes it possible." And near the end, a few days before he died, he dreamed about seeing Jesus and feeling the grass between his toes. The bulletin for the memorial service featured a simple drawing of a wheelchair on the front of it. Attached to the wheelchair was a "for sale" sign. The headline above the wheelchair read, "No longer needed."

Listen up

One day, Jesus will make everything right. One day, Jesus is going to make life a lot more than possible; he's going to make it glorious. Therefore, listen up. Pay attention to the gospel. Pay closer attention to the gospel. The days worth living for are the days that never end, those in which Jesus exercises full authority in his reign over a new and glorious creation.

- SCG, 6-22-97

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