

The Book of Hebrews

Part 4: Our Attention Span, God's Wrath, & Miracles (Heb. 2:1-4)

I. The Greatest Sacrifice: Your Attention

After declaring the beauty and glory of Jesus, along with his supreme position over angels and every other created thing, the author returns to the main point of the letter:

1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, 3 how will 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 testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

(Hebrews 2:1-4)

When the author calls them to pay much closer attention to *“what we have heard,”* he is referring to the message of the Christ and the Gospel, which the entire letter is about to unpack. This is the reality of our union with Jesus in his death, resurrection, and ascension; our complete forgiveness of sin; and Jesus's victory over sin, Satan, and death.

This message was *“first spoken through the Lord”* then confirmed with *“signs and wonders”* as the apostles of Jesus continued to spread the word. The author is urging them to redirect their focus and **attention** to these realities.

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”

- Simone Weil, French philosopher and political activist who was a follower of Jesus.

Some definitions of “attention”:

- *“The act or state of applying the mind to something.”*
- *“The concentration of awareness on some phenomenon to the exclusion of other stimuli ... a process of selectively concentrating on a discrete aspect of information.”*
- *“The taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.”*

Our mind is constantly being presented with an onslaught of stimuli. We have the opportunity and ability to *select* what we focus on. This selection can be an act of great love, both for God and others.

This phrase *“pay attention”* recognizes there is a cost to giving your attention. You are paying from your limited and precious resource of personal attention. As Weil states, this is truly an act of generosity.

In many ways, our attention is more valuable than our money. Giving our attention to others is truly giving of your *self*—your life.

“Community is all about giving others our attention, emptying our souls of self so we can take the other in; so we can, as Weil put it, say to the other: ‘What are you going through?’ Without this attention, community becomes soulless and sterile. (True) Companions’ are literally those who share bread with one another; in a more extensive sense, they are those who share their lives, share their attention.”

- Excerpt from an article on Simone Weil written by Malcolm Schluenderfritz:

There is a battle over our attention... Many things *steal* from our personal “bank account” of attention. We often allow such things in because they ease some kind of inner pain such as depression or anxiety. Our attention is too often given to things that promise to numb us.

But there is a true joy and blessing that comes when we take ownership of our attention span and “invest” our attention to the Lord and his message of grace.

To our ADD friends!

This is equally true for those of us who have a hard time focusing on one thing for too long. The person with an attention “deficit” has a smaller bank account to offer than others, but they can be like the widow in the temple who Jesus praised for her small offering...

41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. 43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; 44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

(Mark 12:41-44)

This woman gave about \$2 to the temple and Jesus praised her in front of everyone else, saying she gave the most of all. The point here is that even a small bit of attention toward Jesus and the Gospel is worth the sacrifice and will be rewarded.

II. Focusing Our Attention (Practically)

So, what does this look like practically? This has to do both with what we're hearing and speaking... In other words, *what messages are you listening to? And what kinds of conversations are you having?*

Are you hearing messages that highlight and unpack the goodness of God and the victory of Jesus?

And are you having spiritual conversations in your life? Do these conversations include Jesus—and if so, are you talking about the glory and power and goodness of who he is?

We all understand how things like entertainment and media can take up too much focus and distract us. However, there are religious distractions as well, some of which can be even more dangerous!

The people who originally read this letter were being distracted by teachers of the Law. They were also influenced by Jewish leaders who were always angry at the Romans and wanted a Messiah who would be a violent conqueror. As a result, their focus was on wrath and judgment.

As we discussed last time, there were also spiritual teachers who focused heavily on angels and supernatural things but gave little *attention* to Jesus, his nature, and the wonders of his shed blood.

All this holds true today. Many believers give their attention to sermons and spiritual conversations that are legalistic and/or produce an atmosphere of doom, gloom, and judgment.

They focus too much on demons and problems in the world. They look at all the stuff we're doing wrong (or what the people "out there" are doing wrong) instead of looking at the One who is seated at the right hand of God, having already secured victory over sin, Satan, and death.

When legalistic "stimuli" take up our attention, we are left with increasing rates of guilt, fear, anxiety, and an unhealthy disconnect from the world.

We must learn to set limits and boundaries for entertainment and media in our lives. But we also have to *pay the price* to cut ties with religious things that take our focus off the joyful and victorious message of the Gospel.

The letter is calling us to *pay much closer attention* to this beautiful message of Christ. If we do not selectively focus on this more in our lives, it says we are in serious danger of "drifting away."

This phrase speaks of slowly moving away from something. The Greek word for "drifting" relates to the flow of water.

Have you ever swum in the ocean for some time and then looked back at the shore to realize you've drifted from your original position and didn't even realize it was happening?

This is how life works when we don't anchor our attention to Jesus and his grace.

People don't *deliberately* walk away from the love and truth of Jesus. Usually, they are slowly distracted by other things as their attention is filled with both the stresses and pleasures of life (see Jesus's "Parable of the Four Soils" in Matthew 13, Mark 4, or Luke 8).

We must wake up and see the importance of engaging our hearts and minds with the message of Christ. Being part of a spiritual community that focuses on the finished work of the cross as well as having Christ-centered resources in your life is an important step.

III. Relooking at the Wrath & Judgment of God

In trying to explain the gravity of the situation and the importance of not letting our attention be stolen, the author talks about the serious consequences that came with the Law. He is warning them by reminding them of what happened to those who drifted from the law's commands in the Old Testament...

For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

There are a few warnings like this in the letter and it's important we understand the heart and intention behind them. Otherwise, we may be in danger of "hearing" a legalistic gospel. In light of the New Covenant and the unending mercy of Christ, we have to ask ourselves how we are to read and understand these warnings. This phrase "*how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation*" is the first such warning.

As we saw earlier, Jesus Christ has forever redefined our image of the Father. His coming released light into thousands of years of shadowy revelation. Even though God was at work in the Old Covenant, people still had an incomplete understanding of him. As the apostle John states, "*grace and truth*" were not yet realized (John 1:17)

Through a legalistic perspective, a person might interpret this statement as: "*If you neglect to focus your attention on Jesus, you will not escape the punishing anger of God!*"

But this is an Old Covenant mentality that breeds fear. Let's think about some other words from the apostle John:

"Perfect love casts out all fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears (punishment, according to the context) is not made perfect in love."
(1 John 4:18)

So, if there is supposed to be *no fear of punishment*, what is this letter warning about?

It is a warning about the reality of self-destruction—which is still very serious but vastly different from rejection or abandonment by God.

The Law of Moses (which the whole letter will begin to focus on) reveals the problem of humanity's self-destruction. Additionally, what the Scriptures refer to as the "wrath of God" is often just a way to describe the experience of suffering the consequences of your own stupidity.

Despite what may seem like the full "truth" given by Moses in the Old Testament, God is not an angry deity punishing us for disobeying him. On the contrary, when we engage with unhealthy things, we punish ourselves and give the enemy an open door to wreak havoc in our lives.

God is the One trying to save us from this! This is why time and time again God sent messengers to warn his people that their self-righteous ways were opening the door to the one who comes to steal, kill, and destroy.

This dynamic also explained in the writings of John once again when Jesus addresses the religious leadership of the day:

**45 "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope.
(John 5:45)**

By choosing the way of Law, which is about self-preservation and self-effort, we choose the way of death. This is why Jesus wept over Jerusalem when he saw their rejection of him.

This rejection led to the entire nation reaping very serious consequences in 70 AD. In their reliance on the Law, they were building up the ultimate harvest of self-destruction.

Many people teach 70 AD as the direct "judgment of God" on Israel. People claim God was pouring out his anger on the Jews for rejecting his Son. But this would mean Jesus prayed "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,*" and God said "*No!*" God rejected God's request. Then God came back, 40 years later, controlling the Roman army and inspiring them to rape women, murder children, enslaving many and exterminating the rest.

Obviously, this is not true. These were simply the tragic consequences of self-righteousness and rebellion.

Jesus brought the full revelation of the Father. Though he did indeed get angry (mostly with legalistic leaders), the Lion of Judah is revealed as a Lamb who lays down his life, even for his enemies (Rev. 5:5-6).

In light of the above, here is another way to state the words “*how we will escape if we neglect so great a salvation*”:

The revelation of God’s grace and forgiveness has come! If you neglect this great salvation and choose to stay in the Law, you will not escape the consequences that come with the Law.

Some would argue this is twisting the text, but they need to ask whether they are reading by what Paul calls “the letter of the law” versus “the spirit of the law.” (see 2 Corinthians 3:6).

There is also further evidence for this perspective from another part of John’s writing. In John 3, we learned that God so loved the world that he sent his Son Jesus to rescue it. He came *not to condemn* the world but to save it (John 3:16-17). This is then the final line of that chapter:

**36 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.
(John 3:36)**

There are at least three possible ways to understand this:

1. The first is the legalistic interpretation: *If you don’t believe in Jesus, then God is still angry with you and will burn you to a crisp.*
2. *You’re drowning in water and you choose not to accept the hand that is reaching out to you. That hand isn’t going to beat you down further into the water. The water itself will drown you... In this perspective, the “wrath of God” is understood to be the natural consequences of rejecting life and peace.*
3. *If someone doesn’t embrace the grace and truth of Christ (John 1:17), they are left with the incomplete image given by Moses. The wrath of God still “abides on them” because they haven’t learned to trust the reality of the Father’s heart.*

IV. Signposts & Wonders

After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4 God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

This message of grace is so wild, so fantastically good, that the writer says God has to confirm it with miracles, signs, and wonders.

Now, just as people can be distracted by angels, so too can they be distracted by signs and wonders. It’s important to remember that signs are *signposts*.

When on a highway, you don't stop to eat at the sign for the nearest restaurant. You don't gather around the sign and bite into it in order to find strength and nourishment. Instead, you let it point you to the real meal.

The real meal that gives us strength is our faith. Our *attention* should be on the wonder of our forgiveness and our union with the Son of God.

We who believe are not to follow after signs and wonders. Instead, signs and wonders follow after us (Mark 16:17). This means as we truly trust and give our attention to the good news of Jesus, miracles will happen.

Therefore, this is not to dismiss the fact that we have a great inheritance of seeing the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Paul told believers to wholeheartedly embrace supernatural gifts such as prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1). Jesus commanded his disciples to heal the sick and do miracles (Matt. 10:8).

But prophecy and miracles are not the foundation for our joy. When they become the foundation, we live a very emotionally unbalanced life. The lack of love, joy, and peace in the life of someone who is passionate about supernatural gifts of the Spirit is often a sign they have built their life around the signpost.

This can look like extreme disappointment and crippling doubt when they do not see miracles happening. It could also look like a level of happiness over miraculous experiences that elevates their mood so much so that when a "normal week" or a "bad day" comes, there is an unhealthy emotional swing that always takes place.

Jesus addressed this when the disciples returned from healing the sick and casting out demons. They were elated with joy, but he said to them:

**20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.
(Luke 10:20)**

This is the message! Our names are written in heaven! *This* is what we are to pay our attention to...

Signs and wonders are part of our lives. They are to be expected and desired. However, they are only meant to help confirm the message that our names are eternally written in the heart of God.

Sometimes God wants to establish this truth without signs and wonders. An example is Thomas, the disciple who wanted to see the resurrected Jesus in the flesh, but the Lord rebuked him, telling him there is an incredible blessing waiting for those who don't see with their eyes and yet still believe.

This whole issue is also why Paul wrote **1 Corinthians 13** in the middle of his longest exposition on spiritual gifts (like prophecy and healing). There Paul reminds his friends that these gifts are all passing away. In other words, they are signposts we will eventually not need.

Thus, he essentially tells them they should not camp out there, but move ever deeper into their destination—which is the person and work of Jesus. Putting our focus there leads to the fruit of love, joy, and peace in our lives.

Let us give our attention to this more than ever before! And let's remember that giving our attention in this way is truly an act of love in and of itself—a sacrifice that will be greatly rewarded, both in this life and the next.

The Gospel message is going to be unpacked throughout the rest of the book. Beginning with the remaining verses of chapter two, we will be introduced to one of the most beautiful articulations of the Gospel ever, learning even more why it deserves every ounce of our fascination.

May God prepare our hearts to ***pay much closer attention to it...***

Follow-up Encounter:

Prepare to take communion. Talk to the Lord about where your attention is these days...

Ask him for wisdom on setting limits with media. Ask him to also shine a light on any ministry or "Christian" media that is fear-based or has an Old Covenant perspective.

Pray that you would not walk out this wisdom (of setting boundaries and limits) out of legalistic fear—but that you would do it from a place of awakened joy, knowing how sweet and good he is.

After some time of praying and meditating on these things, receive the bread and the cup. Share with others what you are sensing God may be speaking.