

From Drifting to Departing – How Unbelief Develops

In some ways, Hebrews is a rather frightening book. While it is full of promises, and full of assurances, it is nearly counterbalanced with some terrifying warnings. The warnings are the alternative to being faithful to the finished faith. These warnings come in the form of the threats of judgement, the awful possibilities looming over those who are not faithful to the finished faith.

Hebrews' main idea is that God's final speech is in His Son, and from there, the book divides into two parts: the ten-chapter part which shows us that Jesus is the Finisher of the Faith, the ultimate Prophet, Priest and King, and the second part which tells us that we must be faithful to the finished faith. But all along, sprinkled within in the form of five warnings, there is the negative idea presented alongside the positive. It's the alternative to drawing near and holding fast: it's drawing back and casting away.

The dangers presented here are not merely the dangers of losing rewards in Heaven, the dangers are quite clearly those of facing God's judgement and punishment. This becomes very confusing for most readers of the book of Hebrews, because the writer seems to be addressing Christians. Can Christians truly be among those who ultimately end up in hell, judged by God?

The answer is complex but not mystifying, if we have ears to hear. Part of the solution is that in every one of the five warnings, the writer of this book includes himself.

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. (2:1)

26 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins (10:26)

For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who *speaks* from heaven, 26 whose voice then shook the earth (12:25)

Now, if the writer, whom we assume to have been a true believer that the Holy Spirit controlled to write inspired Scripture, could include himself as one of the people who could face this danger, we have to conclude that truly saved people are supposed to take these warnings seriously. Now that means one of two alternatives, only one of which can be true: either truly saved people can be lost, or false faith can seem very much like true faith.

Now ask yourself, which one of those ideas is clearly taught in the New Testament? Is there a clear doctrine in Scripture that God can justify you and then declare you guilty again, or reconcile you, and then declare war on you again, or adopt you and then put you back in the devil's family, redeem you and then return the goods, seal you with the Spirit and then break the seal before the day of redemption, give you new life but then withdraw it and return you to spiritual death, wed you and then divorce you? The answer is, there is not. In fact, there is not a single Scripture that ever describes such a thing.

On the other hand, is there a clear doctrine in Scripture that we are to beware that we do not take false faith for the true? We spent a whole message looking at the definition and action and duration of faith, according to Hebrews. Does the Bible describe false faith that can seem even to the person having it, to appear like real faith?

In the Gospels, some people appear to follow Christ but are put off by trials, and Jesus tells the parable of the soils to explain it, contrasting false and temporary faith from the true. Jesus deliberately spoke about goats and sheep, which are roughly the same size, and can be mistaken for each other. The wheat and the tares are very similar looking plants, so similar that the landowner forbade weeding out the tares because it would cause the harvesters to mistakenly pull up true stalks of wheat. Jesus warned that people who called him "Lord, Lord" would find out that He had never

known them, they had never been in relationship. Their false faith had deceived them into thinking there was a relationship when there had never been.

In the epistles, Paul frequently uses the phrase “do not be deceived” before telling us that certain people do not enter the kingdom of God, even if they claim to be saved. Paul calls on his readers of 2 Corinthians to examine ourselves whether we be in the faith. James preaches against false faith, the head-only, mental assent with no heart change. The whole book of 1 John is written to explain what eternal life looks like right now in the life of a believer, and conversely, how the opposite characteristics will be present in someone who is not saved, whatever that person may profess. On nearly every page, we are told that profession of Christ does not mean possession of Christ, that the fruit is the test of the root, that we should not simply say that we know Him, but there must be true spiritual union with Christ, drawing near, holding fast, and bringing forth that fruit.

So as the writer of Hebrews includes himself in these warnings, is he saying, I think I may lose what God has given and promised to sustain, or is He saying, even I may have deceived myself about my faith? Clearly, he is saying the second. He is showing that even a writer of inspired Scripture should have a very humble and reverent attitude toward this matter. So deep is our depravity, so capable are we of excusing ourselves and justifying ourselves and shaping our worldview to nicely suit ourselves, that we should be very fearful of our ability to take our false faith as true faith.

But what this writer does for us is show us that false faith does not suddenly spring upon us like an armed robber. Instead, there is a slow process by which false faith erodes, like a rope taking too much strain, and the fibres beginning to fray and split, one by one. We can see this process in each of the five warnings that the writer gives us. As we study each five in sequence, there is a progression of getting further away from faith. If repentance and right responses don't begin, the process will deepen, and the falseness of the faith will manifest.

What we will see in each of these five warnings is a similar format by the writer. He will warn about the ultimate judgement reserved for apostates and unbelievers, because that's where it ends, if you keep going. The writer will describe the symptom of eroding faith in terms of responding to the Word. That's important because we saw last time that faith is a matter of hearing, and hearing the Word of God. How you respond to the Word is that state of your faith.

He will give a negative and a positive admonition, stop doing certain things and start doing others.

You see, you cannot test to see if you have real faith by some kind of inner experience because once again, we are capable of supplying our hearts with the assurance that our hearts crave. You can test to see if you have real faith if you respond rightly to these warnings.

If we have true faith, then we can arrest the development of unbelief at any stage with repentance and right responses. We will obey his negative and positive admonition. If necessary, we may have to admit that perhaps we have had only false faith up to this point but now desire the true faith of believing His Word, drawing near, and holding fast. We can recognise the symptom, fear the consequence, and take the counsel.

So if the writer of the book of Hebrews included himself in these warnings against unbelief, how much more should we?

Let us take the time to consider these five, not in detail, but as a description of how unbelief grows, how false faith manifests.

Stage 1: Drifting From the Word

Hebrews 2:1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*, (Heb. 2:1-3)

The first symptom is one of drifting from the Word.

The word refers to the movement of a boat which is not moored. The current causes the boat to slowly move with the current, but soon it is far from shore, far from being moored.

What does this mean spiritually? It means a slow movement away from the things of God. The current of the world slowly pulls us away from hearing and studying the Word, away from prayer, away from worshipping and fellowshiping with God's people, away from service.

It is not a sudden collapse; it is a relaxing of spiritual discipline. Drifting is giving in to the momentum of the world, going with the current of the sin nature. It is when you grow weary of fighting the flesh, and the world, and temptation, and just go where your lusts seem to take you.

The thing about drift is this: you're not actively paddling in the wrong direction, you're just not resisting it. As you lay there passively, you can feel like you're not really doing anything wrong, but in fact, you're moving. The current is moving you. And eventually, you are surprised to find just where you are.

A Christian need not chase after false doctrine to drift. He just has to stop regularly reading the Word. He just stops regularly assembling to hear the Word. He stays home a bit more, watches a bit more TV, or online videos. She doesn't hate the Bible, she just, given a choice, shelves that Christian book and goes to her favourite shopping sites or clothing or health or fitness or décor sites. Nothing outrageous or ungodly, but the attention of the heart is slowly drifting. When drift is settling in, you come to the Lord's Day and feel like a stranger coming back to things you know you should love but which seem far away.

What will be the response of true faith? Verse 1: we must the more earnest heed. We must re-double our efforts to pay attention. We must snap out of our worldly day-dreaming and tune back in. We must switch off the distractions, clear out whatever is crowding out and drowning out the Word, and listen. Decide that you will make no more excuses for drift, and listen to the Word with careful attention. Go back to the gym of reading, hearing, memorising, studying the Word. Increase the intake.

Because drift is the first stage. If it is left unchecked, we come to the second stage.

Stage 2: Doubting the Word

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in *their* heart, And they have not known My ways.' 11 So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'" 12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, (Heb. 3:7-14)

Here, the attitude to the Word has gone from a passive resistance to a more active resistance. The

writer explicitly warns against hardening the heart, which means to begin to resist the Word. The illustration here was Israel during the Exodus. When it was time to enter the land, the command was, go in, conquer the people, for the Lord will be with you. But once the twelve spies came back, ten of them said that the people were too big, and that meant that God's promises were too small. So the people *doubted* that what God had said could be relied upon. They got angry that they were now in a position where obedience was going to be costly. They doubted the Word, and with that doubt came fear and anger.

The second negative symptom on the way to total unbelief is doubting the Word. Now let me distinguish between two kinds of doubt. There is a the kind that doesn't understand, but wants to understand. It is struggling to make sense of things, but wants to make sense of it. Like Mary. Then there is the kind that doubts because of the demand that faith puts on you. It is becoming sceptical on purpose, like the Israelites did. It's the second kind that is being warned against.

After you are drifting for a while, the next thing that begins to happen is that the Bible seems too strict. The life of holiness seems too demanding. The instruction about heaven and hell seems too serious. And a sense of resentment builds up. It can't be that serious.

But it isn't coming from an honest heart wanting to know. It is coming from a hardening heart that dislikes conviction and discipline and change.

Angry doubts. Why should God care what I do with my money? Why are these Christians poking their nose into my business? Who said I have to give this up- that's just your legalistic interpretation! I don't see why we have to be so exacting about everything! Can't we live and let live!

Who is the person most likely to be quietly nursing some angry doubts? The one who has already been drifting for some time. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing of the Word of God. If you neglect the hearing, we start to become unbelieving. Your heart has been growing cold, and now your heart is growing hard.

What does the writer prescribe as the remedy?

He tells us to beware of this in verse 12, to not harden our hearts and allow this doubt to come in. Chapter 4:1 tells us to fear. In other words, while you still have feeling, be aware that the feeling is becoming less! If a slumber of death is beginning, then rouse yourself while you can.

So he tells us, exhort one another daily. He says in 4:10 to be diligent to enter that rest. It is the same idea. Counter the drift and the sluggishness with alertness and action.

If drifting and doubting goes on, we reach stage 3.

Stage 3: Dullness to the Word

12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. **Hebrews 6:1** Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits. 4 For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God

and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put *Him* to an open shame. (Heb. 5:12-6:6)

Here the writer says his readers had become dull of hearing. He wanted to say many advanced things about Melchisedek, but he won't be able to, he will have to keep it to a minimum, because of the dullness of some of his readers.

When they should have reached a place of teaching others, they were still in the place of spiritual infancy. They lacked good judgement, they lacked the ability to discern good from evil, true from false, beautiful from ugly. Theirs was a stunted growth.

But the thing to realise is that the writer blames them. He is not faulting them for growing at a different rate to others. He is saying, you have chosen to be immature. He tells us very clearly that maturity is a matter of use in verse 14, a matter of practice, of deliberate exercise of the truth already received.

In other words, this is a chosen immaturity. It's deliberately delayed development.

Why would someone want to remain there? When you are drifting, and your heart is hardening into doubt, you don't want more truth, because you don't want more responsibility. You are satisfied with shallowness, not interested in deepened holiness, because immaturity is a great excuse to shun responsibility.

You see, there is a part of childhood which unfortunately the world gets backwards. The world seems to teach that a child should not only enjoy childhood, but should want to remain a child forever. In societies of honour and strength, growing out of childhood was seen as a good thing. In fact, Paul's words "1 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (1 Cor. 13:11) don't make sense to our culture, where we want our children to remain childish forever. And in fact, we now have an epidemic of adults who are really still children in attitude, people who grew old, but never grew up. We have people who don't want responsibility, they don't want to work hard and earn, they don't want to marry, they don't want to have children, they don't want to belong to churches, they don't want to commit or submit to anything.

And that's what you have in the church as well. You meet people who have been saved for ten, twelve, fifteen years, still telling you that they are young Christians, baby Christians, and you can't expect them to know their Bibles, or digest sound doctrine, or disciple others. Ten years! Charles Spurgeon was saved at age 15. A year later, he preached his first sermon. Four years later, he became pastor of New Park Street Church. Eleven years after his conversion he was preaching to 5000 people at Metropolitan Tabernacle.

Christian maturity is not a function of years. It is a function of appetite and obedience: how much you desire the Word, and how much you obey the Word.

That's why you find two-year-old Christians surging past people who've professed Christ for four decades. Appetite and obedience.

He writer says, Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection,

Let's leave this immaturity and its excuses behind, and deliberately seek growth.

Very similar exhortations each time: pay earnest attention, be diligent to enter that rest, and exhort one another.

Because now we begin to approach the final stages of unbelief, where apostasy is very near, where false faith is almost complete.

Stage 4: Despising the Word

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26-31)

Sin wilfully here doesn't refer to mere wilful sin, otherwise there would be no hope for anyone. It refers to the wilful, knowing rejection of Jesus as your sacrifice for sin, turning back and away to some other sacrifice or atonement, or belief. This is not passive drifting, it is beyond doubting, it is beyond dullness. Now the person has reached a place of rejection. The word *rejected* in verse 28 means to reject as invalid, to nullify, to regard as nothing or worthless.

Now a person has reached the place where his dullness has turned into looking for alternatives. He became distant from the Word, then he became harder to the Word, then he became disinterested in the Word, and now he is looking for alternatives to the Word. He is rejecting the idea that God's Word is God's Word, that it is the truth.

If you have reached this stage, then it is an emergency.

35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. (Heb. 10:35)
22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith
23 Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope
24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,
25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:22-25)

Because if we do not, we reach the final stage

Stage 5: Departing From the Word

25 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who *speaks* from heaven, 26 whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." 27 Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God *is* a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:25-29)

To refuse Him who speaks is described in verse 25 as "turning away". This is a strong word which means to turn around completely, to turn your ears in the opposite direction, to reject entirely. This is then apostasy, the complete and total denial of Christ. You can only do this, if you have not truly known Him. But if you have not known Him, your false faith could have been a steady downward journey, from drifting, to doubting, to dullness, to despising, to finally departing.

And all along, the writer calls for a kind of spiritual cardio: get active, be alert, pay attention, listen to Him, and don't harden, but be fearful of the dangers around your soul, be diligent, as the apathy

seems to be lulling you to sleep, refuse to stay there, wake up, leave those first principles, go on to maturity. Encourage one another daily, don't forsake the assembling together.

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