



Gaze Excessively at Jesus

Hebrews 2:1-4

My in-laws own a place in Interlochen, Michigan on a small lake, and for the last few years we have gone there for a family vacation. Now, honestly, it's a little difficult to relax on a family vacation with five kids, but there are occasions when we're out in the water and both Tracy and I are able to get on a raft and simply lay there in the sun, listening to the water lapping against the shore. It's nice. However, every once in a while we have to be on alert – not only because the children sometimes might be in need – but because we can drift away into lily pads. That can be kind of gross, so, we have to open our eyes, look around. And sometimes it's surprising how far we've drifted when it doesn't even feel as though we've moved. Have you ever experienced that before?

Have you ever experienced it on a larger scale – like out at sea or in a large body of water? Now, what's supposed to keep you safe from drifting at sea? Anchors, right? Did you know that anchors actually are a historic Christian symbol. There's even a Latin phrase *Crux Mihi Anchora*, which means, "The Cross is My Anchor." The point is that the gospel, and only the good news, keeps us anchored with God and safe in the waters of life.

But you could hear that and say, "Yes! The cross is my anchor." And yet you still feel like you're drifting. Isn't possessing the information good enough? No. The truth has to possess you. But what does that mean?

The title of this sermon is "Gaze Excessively at Jesus." In other words, if you want to be guaranteed that you won't drift away, you must proactively meditate on, ponder, focus your attention on Jesus. You can't simply read your Bible and say, "Oh, I read about Jesus today," but you must stare at him until God's glory affects your entire being – your thoughts, emotions, will and actions! This idea reminds me of when I was in junior high and I collected old American coins. I had two gold coins. I had one cent piece from the 1700's. I had many coins from the 19th century. When I got money, I went to the coin store. I *loved* the detail and artistry. I loved that I was owning something that was part of history. But I didn't just buy coins and put them in a safe. I loved looking at them over and over again. I stared at them. And I didn't just stare at them. I bought a special magnifying glass so I could look at more of the details of the coin. By having that, I could tell why the coin was in the condition it was in.

I'm sure that other friends of mine and even other adults who knew me thought that I was odd. I was spending too much time staring at coins. But the more I stared, the more I knew about the coins. Yes, people could have said I was excessive, but I didn't care. It's what I loved. But then something happened. Twenty years ago, on January 19, 1997; I began to drift from coins. My days of excessive gazing was coming to an end. It wasn't something I did on purpose. I loved my coins. I wasn't trying to

turn away from them. But I did turn to something else. Actually, I turned to someone else. On that day in 1997, I began dating Tracy. And when I began to date Tracy, coins lost their appeal.

This example is obviously a positive example. I drifted for the better – the much better. But just like you can drift away from something inferior by focusing on the superior. You can also drift away from the superior by gazing excessively on the inferior. And this is precisely what the writer of Hebrews focuses on in the four verses we’re going to be studying today. You will drift away from Christ if you do not keep your gaze on him. And that’s an awful and terrifying position to find yourself in.

Before I say anymore, please turn in your Bible to Hebrews 2, and we will read verses 1-4 together this morning. Let me pray before we read:

2 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. ¹

The first sentence sets the stage for these verses. The word “Therefore” means that what’s about to be said is connected to what was previously said. And previously, the author has been talking about how Jesus is superior to everything. Jesus is the superior prophet, priest and king. And Jesus is superior to angels. He’s not merely a very powerful created being. He’s not merely a very important human. He’s the God-Man and he reigns over all creation! The prophets point to him, the angels have declared messages pointing to him. And the angels serve Jesus to give us strength to endure!

Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to him! He’s worthy of our attention! But the way this is written, we get the idea that the Christians have not been focusing as much on Jesus in the recent days. He says that “we must pay much closer.” In other words, they haven’t been paying as much attention. Have you ever felt the drift away from Jesus? You’re not reading your Bible very much. Prayer is practically non-existent. Getting together with other Christians seems more rote than it does an enjoyment. Obedience is a drudgery. When you hear people talking about joy in the Lord, you’re wondering what’s wrong with you because, while you know the gospel is great news, it doesn’t resonate with you much anymore. Have you ever felt that way?

Have you also ever wondered if you will continue in the faith? There was a poet named Robertson McQuilkin who wrote a poem entitled, “Let Me Get Home Before Dark.” In part of that poem, he writes,

**I fear the Dark Spectre may come too soon—
or do I mean, too late?
That I should end before I finish
or finish, but not well.
That I should stain your honor, shame your**

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:1–4.

**name, grieve your loving heart.
Few, they tell me, finish well . . .
Lord, let me get home before dark.**

Oh, that thought that I should end before I finish. I pray that would never be me or any of you in this room! But it has happened for people we've known. I have friends who've already shipwrecked themselves and denied the faith. What happened? In their scenarios, I could probably say it was that they drifted. And that brings me to an important and question that I think we need to answer *very* practically:

Why do we drift? There are so many reasons why, but let me discuss three. It could be simply because ***we allow the message to become normal*** to us. Years ago, Tracy and I used to go out to Tacoma, Washington to visit her grandmother while she was alive. We went a few times, and I was always amazed at how we could see Mount Ranier almost wherever we were. I'd stop at the grocery store, get out of the car and then I'd be amazed that Mount Ranier was *right there!* People who lived in Tacoma probably knew immediately that I was a tourist. They took it for granted because they saw it every day. And so with us spiritually. We can hear the message of Jesus for decades, and instead of allowing the message to dig deep within us, we simply assume "we've heard it before."

Another reason for drifting is that ***we allow ourselves to be distracted***. There are many things in our lives that are good things, necessary things. And many times we allow those things to consume our focus. I have five children. My children are five glorious good gifts and yet they can bring many distractions. Bills, cars, TV, sports, getting together with family or friends. All of these things can be ok or even necessary; but we allow them to distract us from the main priority of seeking first the kingdom of God. So, we get to the end of our day, we feel exhausted and instead of soaking in the Word, we turn to relaxation. After all, it's not a sin to relax, right? We're just so busy. We need to wait for another time where studying the Word is convenient. Listen, we can't blame other things or people for being distracted. We allow ourselves to be distracted. And sadly, living a distracted life is a drifting life.

Now, there's one more reason I want to give for why we drift: ***we allow trials to blind us***. We don't normally go through just one trial at a time. Even in the small trials, it's not just one thing. This past week, we had one morning where two of our kids needed to leave earlier in the morning. So, we have that one thing to do, but then in the midst of this, one child spills their cereal all over the floor! Why can't things go easily? The same is with so many other things in life. And these trials can serve as distractions, too. Something breaks down, a relationship is in turmoil, your child is pursuing sin. You're sick. In all of these moments, you can feel like giving up or at least slowing down your spiritual focus. After all, you're exhausted. You feel beat down.

It's this final scenario that the Christians here are facing. They've already gone through one round of persecution. They're facing another round under Emperor Nero. Church members are defecting, false teaching is coming to them. How much more can a person handle? In the midst of this, you can imagine that at first the Christians are simply focusing on all of these trials and they're trying to put the fires out. But all the while that they're focusing on the *fires*, they're losing their focus on Christ. As a result, they're drifting.

We're not so different from these people, are we? So, what's the solution to drifting? **Gaze excessively at Jesus**. The words in the Greek refer to an excessiveness. It's like when I'd stare at the coins I had. People might think I'm odd or strange, but I'd learn things through it and grow in my appreciation. So it

is with Christ – gaze excessively. Don't stop gazing. And don't just think "I'm not going to stop." Think, "I'm going to look more intently than I've ever looked before. In the infinite glories of Christ, you can gaze for all eternity and never reach the depths of his magnificence!

So, if you're feeling like you've been drifting or dry; don't settle for the mediocre Christian life that is content with knowing the information, but not growing. Look at your life. Look at how you're living. Look at what you're gazing at. Then, take your gaze and turn it. As the author writes later on in this book, we are to "run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. . ."²

Is Jesus worth changing your schedule around? Is Jesus worth getting your gaze fixed? The Christians in Rome might have read this and thought to themselves, "But you don't know how hard my life is right now." And maybe you're thinking that, too. I just can't take another step.

Addressing that type of mentality, the author has told us that since Jesus is superior to all, he's worth being followed. And, in fact, no matter how hard things get, Jesus is worth being followed. He details this throughout this book, but he highlights here a few reasons why drifting should not be an option for us whatsoever: He shows us that the gospel is superior in retribution, mediation, witnesses and miracles. So, gaze excessively on Jesus or drift. Why?

1. The gospel is superior in retribution (vv. 2-3).

Verse 2 says, "²For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution. . ."³ The word "For" connects with the previous verse. It answers why we shouldn't want to drift away. His answer relates to angels – what he's already been discussing in chapter 1. Jesus is superior to angels.

Why did he bring up angels? I believe, at least in part, to get to this point. The message declared by angels proved to be reliable. What does that mean? Well, I believe he's specifically talking about Moses and the Law here. While he talked about prophets in the previous chapter, much of his attention from now on is going to be focusing around the Law. If that's to what he's referring, then this makes sense. As I said last week, both Stephen before he was stoned to death and the apostle Paul (in Galatians) affirm that the Law was given by God through angels (Acts 7:53, Gal. 3:19). In addition, in Deuteronomy 33:2, when Moses speaks of the Mount Sinai experience, he says that the LORD came "from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand."⁴

Angels served as mediators of the Law to Moses, who was also a mediator to the people. We should understand that angels are spectacular creatures. We studied that last week. And because of who they are, people ought to listen to them. What I mean by that is that they are messengers. That's what "angel" means. So, they are God's messengers. You should listen to God's messengers!

What the angels mediated proved to be reliable. It's trustworthy and true. And so, every transgression or disobedience was punished. This is referencing all the various punishments for disregard and active disobedience to the Law. How many stories do we have in the Old Testament of God punishing the

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 12:1–2.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:2.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Dt 33:2.

people for dishonoring him? Someone touches the ark and dies. Achan is stoned. Murderers are put to death. Kings who pay no attention to God's Law are given to their reprobate minds and deceived. The punishments vary, but the point is that the Law is correct, and so there was punishment.

Now, the reason why this argument is so important here is because it seems as though the Hebrew Christians were tempted to leave Jesus and turn back to their former way of life. It's easier to simply live as a Jew with all the sacrifices than it is to follow Jesus. In following Jesus, they've only received hardship and pain! Plus, the Old Testament is true, right? And it was given through angels, yes? So, why not go back to something that's tried and true instead of following Jesus? It can't hurt, can it?

Well, actually it can. The author uses a lesser-to-greater argument here. He says that if the Law was true and gave punishments (look at verse 3), "3 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"⁵ Since Jesus is superior to angels, and messages that were mediated by angels received perfect punishment, how much more is the punishment for those who neglect such a great salvation? The contrast is between the Law and the gospel. The message mediated by angels and then the message that declares Jesus as the one who died the death sinners deserve in order to give rescue, salvation, peace, eternal life and reconciliation with God! This is the gospel and it is superior to the Law.

Knowing this, let's focus on some of the word choices of the author in verse 3. First look at the word "neglect." The idea of this word is connected to the word "drift." And this is something very important for us to note. Some people think that we go to Hell because we outright deny Jesus. But that's not true. John 3 says that the world is condemned already because we are sinners, and we love our sin. Left to ourselves, we won't search for salvation. We'll deny we need salvation. Or, if we recognize that there's something wrong, we'll go about being reconciled with God on our own terms based on our own perceived wisdom. Since that's the case, the way that a person can guarantee that they will be separated from God forever is this: neglect Jesus. Just don't think about him. Don't ponder him. Don't give him attention.

I've actually heard people try to use neglect as a reason for why individuals shouldn't be punished. They'll say something like, "It's not like the people are outright denying God. They just aren't thinking about him." But isn't that a problem, too? God says that he gives people enough information for them to be culpable and yet people don't pursue him. And when the truth is right before them, they think it's ok that they don't give him the time of day. I used this illustration last Sunday night, and I think it's at least somewhat helpful here. I'll modify it somewhat. Imagine that I get home from a day's work, and I come into the kitchen and Tracy says to me, "I have been thinking about you all day!" And then I respond by saying, "I didn't really think about you." That's going to hurt, right. But maybe I could talk my way past that. But let's say I then said, "And I don't really think about you at all when I'm away from you ever." You can't talk your way past that. If I don't think about my wife ever, what does that say about the value I put on my wife? What does that communicate about how I value our relationship? It means I don't value her. And, that's going to show up in my actions and words.

This is the point here in Hebrews. People who *neglect* Jesus and the gospel message do not value Jesus and the gospel. Therefore, those people are not followers of Christ and are still bound in their sin. Since that's the scenario, what are they facing? The author of Hebrews says that those people face a more severe judgment than those who lived in the Old Testament time period!

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:3.

Ventura, did you know that there's different degrees of punishment in Hell? Some people tend to say "All sin is sin in God's eyes." And if you mean that all sin deserves punishment, then yes, that's true. But if you mean that all sin is punished equally in Hell, then you're wrong. Even this text tells us this. There is a greater punishment for those who reject Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, than those who rejected angels, who mediated the Law. Even Jesus taught this. When he sends out his disciples to preach to the surrounding region, he says that for the towns that reject Jesus' message, **"¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."**⁶

You know, we are so prone to think that the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for sinners only has good news attached to it. But there's also greater warning with it. And the writer of Hebrews isn't afraid to emphasize it. But some of you might wonder *why* there's greater warning! I think a man by the name of John Calvin actually summarizes the reason quite well. He wrote this: **"God wishes his gifts to be valued by us at their proper worth. The more precious they are, the baser is our ingratitude if they do not have their proper value for us. In accordance with the greatness of Christ, so will be the severity of God's vengeance on all despisers of the Gospel"** (as quot. in P.E. Hughes, p. 76).

The reason the severity is worse is because the rejection is a greater rejection. One pastor named Kent Hughes, wrote, **"It is more blameworthy to sin against love than against Law, to ignore God's mercy than to break his Law"** (R.K. Hughes, p. 52). Why reject "such a great salvation." The Greek word used for "such a great" is actually a rarer term that seems to highlight the greatness and excellence of salvation. This salvation is so extremely glorious – beyond words! How can you even think about neglecting and drifting from it? Like a fire catches our attention and keeps us staring at it, the glory of the gospel should captivate us always.

As we put all of this together, we see how the writer of Hebrews, with utmost seriousness and sobriety, confronts this wavering church. And, this type of confrontation may be what's needed for some or many in this room. We've been too lenient on ourselves. We've not taken the sin of drifting seriously. It is not worth it to drift. Jesus and the gospel are superior!

And it's on that point that the writer of Hebrews continues. He shows us that Jesus is superior because the retribution is superior, but he also shows us how the message of the gospel is a superior message to the Law by contrasting the glories of the gospel with that of the Law. So, we see the next point:

2. The gospel has a superior Mediator (v. 3b).

I love this point. We can be tempted to give up on the Christian faith and turn to something else, but we have to ask ourselves a question: Who declared this message? The Christians in Rome were thinking that messages by angels were very impressive, and in one sense, they are! But who not only declared the message of the gospel, but was the central person of the gospel message? Jesus!

Jesus isn't merely some prophet, priest or king. He isn't just an exalted angel. He is the Lord! He is God in the flesh. Sometimes we forget that, don't we? You know, I've had many conversations with people who are doubting their faith, and as they talk about their questions about this or that Bible verse, I say to them, "If Jesus really did come to this earth, live, die and rise from the dead, I've got to deal with these

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 10:15.

questions. If he didn't, then none of it matters." My point is that our faith is wrapped up entirely around Jesus. That's the author's point here.

Our faith isn't resting in the mediation of angels. Our faith has found a resting place in *the LORD!* The Lord's mediation is far superior than that of angels. That doesn't mean the Law isn't good. The Law is good. But the Law doesn't rescue us. It can't. But Jesus saves! And the message of the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. The gospel has a superior mediator than the Law does. Do you believe this? Will you believe?

But there's more.

3. The message was affirmed by witnesses (v. 3c).

The gospel was affirmed by witnesses: it was attested to us by those who heard. . . .⁷ In these few words, we seem to learn something new about the author of Hebrews. He was not an eyewitness to the resurrection nor was he taught directly by Jesus. He says that the message of the gospel was attested to *us*. He seems to be including himself in with the readers. This is one reason why I do not believe Paul was the author of Hebrews. He teaches elsewhere that he received his message directly from Jesus. The writer here says the message was attested to him as well as the others. But it was attested to them by those who heard. The implication is "those who heard him." Eyewitnesses taught others.

Listen, the gospel message didn't happen in some obscure corner of the world where there was no one else around. It happened in front of people! There are eyewitness accounts. And there are eyewitnesses who gave their lives to spread the message of Jesus. This gospel message is affirmed by the people who walked and talked with Jesus, those who saw the miracles. And this message was spread to the next generation by them.

This past week, I came across a writing by Irenaeus who recounts his childhood days when he learned from Polycarp. Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus wrote this:

I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it; so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the 'Word of life', Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures (as quot. in P.E. Hughes, p. 79).

Sometimes we think that the stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John existed in a vacuum. They didn't touch real people after them, right? Those are Bible stories, not real stories. That's absolutely not true. These men reached out to so many, and we have accounts of how they loved and affected others

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:3.

through their witness and testimony. John to Polycarp to Irenaeus. But it doesn't stop there. This message has continued on in our day! And we can say that we believe today because God, through the Holy Spirit, caused the disciples to follow Jesus and take the gospel seriously! When they heard the Great Commission to evangelize, they went in the Spirit's strength! And, by the way, the only way that the gospel message is going to spread today and continue on in the years and decades and potentially centuries to come is if we, Christ's disciples, recognize that we must pass on the testimony of the eyewitnesses! We have their testimony. It's the superior message of the gospel. Let's continue the tradition and share.

So, the message is superior because of the retribution, because of the superior mediator, because of the witnesses, but also because of the miracles.

4. The message was affirmed by God through miracles (v. 4).

Verse 4 says, "4 while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."⁸

The words "signs," "wonders," and "miracles" do not carry much distinction with them, although there have been many who have tried to force certain distinctions with them. That said, there are variants of perspectives given with these words. The word "sign" refers to an incident that is intended to point to the veracity of God's message. Like a physical sign may point to something, so these signs point to God's truth! The word "wonders" refers to something that would cause awe in the audience. A miracle is a powerful manifestation. So, you could have one event that can be referred to with all of these words. By using these three words, I think the author is compounding the evidence.

And, by the way, it's not just that the author says that miraculous events prove the gospel is true. He says that God *also* bore witness by these things. In other words, Jesus himself and what he has done is enough. But God also chose to have eyewitnesses and then also to work through these signs and miracles. And finally, he adds gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts would have included those gifts like speaking in tongues and prophecy. But these gifts also include hospitality, teaching, service and so many more.

And, guess what? The Holy Spirit continues to give gifts today. And it's all for God's glory in order to show the world that Jesus saves. He saved us and gave us strength to follow him. Even if we are in the midst of storms and confusion and persecution or pain, the Lord reigns! And the Holy Spirit is at work within us to love and serve at his will.

Instead of drifting, will we gaze on our Savior who is superior to angels and also has sent the Holy Spirit. Angels minister to us and the Holy Spirit empowers us to do God's will. We have all we need because of our Superior Savior. Do you believe that?

Pay closer attention to the message. Do not drift. Gaze excessively at Jesus. Praise God for the superior mediator who has given us superior news through witnesses and miracles. Praise Jesus for giving us the Holy Spirit to embrace the message and live it out.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:4.

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