

Why So Dull?

Hebrews 2:1-4

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We are in the third sermon in this series Gospel GPS, the pathway for spiritual formation. The last couple weeks, we've been looking at this question, what is spiritual maturity? And so now what we're going to do is we're going to make a slight pivot. Spiritual maturity is having a greater understanding of the depth and power of the gospel not just to solve my need for forgiveness but rather to deeply change our character and who we are. You remember as I said last week that one of the things that is a reality for how we live is we often see the Bible as the place that feeds us intellectually. Maybe it expands our understanding of who God is. It can also deepen and enflame very good convictions. But it is very possible to attend to God's word only hoping that it will strengthen our intellect and expand our convictions but hoping it might not have to get into the whole character thing. But what we find out is that the power of the gospel never wants to merely make us mentally or intellectually stronger and leave our character unchanged or not expand our convictions. You can have the first two and still not know the power of the gospel.

Now, what we're doing is we're turning from what it means to work towards spiritual maturity, and we are trying to understand what the obstacles often are for us growing in maturity in Christ. And so we're going to enter it this week by looking at a familiar passage from the letter to the Hebrews which we preached through in a previous series. But we're going to be looking at these four verses and the concern that the pastor had for his congregation. And I would hope that this serves for us as an invitation to engage God and to engage ourselves in much deeper and robust ways.

Before you turn there, as preparation for this, I want to make you aware that the letter to the Hebrews and the sermon that he preaches is very similar to the letter that Paul writes to all the churches. And we've been in Colossians recently, but it's the same in Ephesians and the same in Philippians. If you go back and look at them, he makes great declarations and beautiful portraits of who Christ is and His person and what He's done. He then asks in some way, therefore, because of the foundation who is Christ, what are we called to do?

The writer to the Hebrews does the same thing. He spends the first chapter declaring the glories and radiance and power of who Jesus is, and then he begins chapter 2 with these words. Hear now God's word.

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, 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, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Lord, as we have responded to your gracious offering and provision for us materially and physically, we now turn to you and ask that you would provide for us and our whole being living and walking in what it means to be a disciple of Christ. What does it mean to find deeper formation in the gospel? Father, we need you to teach us. And we pray you would do that through your attested word which are witnesses to your glory what we need to know to grow into maturity. Even as it warns us, O Lord, may your Spirit testify with our spirit. May you lead us to deeper places of dependence on Jesus Christ. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

The preacher to the Hebrews' main concern for the body of Christ to whom he was writing was a theme which he returns to over and over again and which is also attested by other writers in the New Testament. And that is the problem of dullness. In some sense, he's asking the congregation if this is who Christ is, why so dull? Why so dull?

He gives them a warning. He warns them against two things, both of them woven together in this passage. First, he wants to make them aware of drifting and neglecting. And then, I believe, inferred in all of it, in that very word "Therefore" is a minding. Drifting, neglecting, minding.

Let's look together at this idea of drifting. He says here in these opening words, "Pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." He's calling them back to truths which he's just spent the first portion of his sermon establishing. And it might seem as elementary. It might seem as beginning theology 101, that Jesus is the Son of God through whom God has made His radiant glory known, and that it is Christ who gave of His body and blood that we might be redeemed. And so it seems like, well, okay. But you see, that's the issue. His concern is that we somehow think that those elementary truths are truths that are meant for back there when one proclaimed faith in Jesus Christ. But then as we continue to lead on, how do we appropriate the deeper truths of what it means to say that Christ is the radiant glory of who God is? His concern is to be careful that you do not drift away from these important truths that have been established for you.

And he uses this word drifting as a nautical term that we need to understand in two ways. First, drifting can happen because perhaps you lose power, or some current comes on you, and you begin to drift off your intended course. It could be something outside of us blows us off the direction that we were intended to go. But another way that we begin to drift is not because something is acting upon us but because of something that is acting from within us or something to which we have failed to pay attention. And so we begin to drift off course thinking it's not so important or thinking something like, I'm not really off course. It's just life. And we try to apply rationality to that. We say things like life is so busy right now. Or my life is so full, I simply don't have time to pay attention to what's going on inside my heart.

Our outward actions are not disconnected from what's going on inside of us. We are complex beings. We have thoughts. We have feelings. And from those feelings come desires, and from those desires we make choices. And if we're honest, sometimes we get tired, and we're not that interested. Or we get bored with asking the harder questions of what the radiant glory of Christ and His power and His salvation have to say about our deeper interior selves. And we begin to drift.

It happens a lot like this. On October 23rd of 2009, a British couple Paul and Rachel Chandler retired and sold everything they had. They had a boat. They fixed it up. They went to the Seychelles Islands. It's about 115 islands roughly, and it's a beautiful place in pictures. It's pretty far off the coast from Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. This is a cool place to go if you're able. I'll put it that way.

So here they are on their sailboat. They're going to different places that they want to go. And they take four-hour watches, and this happened to be Rachel's watch. Her husband Paul was down below resting, and she was up on deck at about 2:30 in the morning. There was no breeze, very little breeze at all. There was really not much current, but she needed to keep moving. And so she turned on the motor. The motor is kind of pattering along, and she's trying to get where they're going.

The challenge is what happened not while they were there but before they ever left. Her husband happened to be a very, very bright man. He was not just a good sailor but a very bright man. In fact, he was a Cambridge educated engineer. As the article in the *New York Times* in 2009 said, he tended to view the world in a hyper rational way. He considered the risks of being hijacked to be the equivalent to slamming into a partly submerged shipping container in the middle of the ocean, meaning it was theoretically possible but very unlikely. Technically, he was right according to the author. A few dozen ships were hijacked each year around that time out of the tens of thousands that sailed past Somalia, putting the odds of their being captured at about 0.1 percent.

The Seychelles, a sumptuous vacation spot, was pretty safe at the time. But unbeknownst to them, pirates had begun to discover it. At 2:30 a.m. on October 23, 2009, with the little motor running, the noise on the water failed to alert her of what was approaching. And as you might imagine, they were hijacked, taken ashore, and then taken deep into Somalia, and they were held captive for 388 days.

What this story begins to display is this. We can have all the rational thoughts that we want, but we may not realize those percentages may seem a little less risky until you find yourself right in the middle of it, until you find yourself in a sea full of challenges and problems or shark-filled waters or pirates. What seemed like just a little drifting seemed okay. And the next thing you know, you're being held captive. This is the concern of the preacher to the Hebrews.

And here's the issue. Drifting happens not as a result of doing nothing. Oftentimes, drifting spiritually can happen even when we're extremely busy. Believe it or not, the old English word from which we get the word sloth tends to translate in our ears to a person who's just lazy, not doing anything, sitting on the couch, eating potato chips, and watching Netflix. But sloth has a much broader understanding. Dorothy Sayers, a Catholic writer, said it this way when writing about sloths, "One of its favorite tricks, a sloth will dissemble itself under the cover of a whiffling activity of the body." Meaning we can be extremely busy.

We can be paying attention to all kinds of things. Yet, we become slothful or lazy in the things that matter most. The tyranny of the urgent begins to drown out the imperative of the important. And slowly but surely, we begin to say, I'm too busy. I'm slammed with too much family, too much work, too much life. But actually, in the midst of our business, we become slothful, and we begin to drift from the truths which actually ground us. We begin to attend our hearts, our desires, our emotions, our choices, our lives to rival truths, the truths of trying to reach ambition or success or to-do lists, or the relationships, or trying to find meaning in relationships which cannot bear the weight which we put on them. But only in Christ alone, the truth can actually give us the grounding which we need.

Life has been so busy. I'm so full. I haven't given much thought to what's going on internally. And slowly but surely, that which really operates beneath us is not rationality. We like to think of ourselves as first and foremost thinking things, but we are first and foremost loving things as James K. A. Smith says. And if we have failed to attend to what our desires are, what our emotions are, then those are the things which begin to shape our choices. And we begin to drift and listen to rival truths.

This is the concern for the preacher of Hebrews. It is my concern for us. It is my concern for myself. Are you attending to what's going on beneath?

And here's the problem with modern church. Let's just get real. Oftentimes, some of the most dangerous waters that a Christian can be in is in the church. We've set up life where the waters feel just warm enough where we know people aren't really going to ask how are you really doing? What is really going on? And so we begin to live a divided life. We begin to say, I'm fine. We have the tip of the iceberg. We have the part of the iceberg we want everybody to see. We post it. We share it. We show it. But what oftentimes is going on is the part that nobody else sees but we know is there, but we're too busy to attend to it because when we're honest, it's too messy and too uncomfortable to really address.

And here's how it shows itself. This is just an example. You might have somebody in your life, maybe even in this room or in your relationship pool, that you're angry with. You know you've got to have a conversation. Or maybe there's a whole group of people you're angry with. But what you do is you push that down because attending to that problem is messy, uncomfortable, and hard, and you might get rejected. So what we do is we play the dual life game. On the outside, you're fine. But on the inside, you've got this low-grade chronic anger just beneath the surface that if left unattended will break. And we are actually already in captivity if we're leading a dual life in that way.

And I will tell you as a pastor, as a pastor to other pastors, we play that game. And I also know congregations do the same. How are you drifting? How might you be allowing what's underneath the

surface to go unaddressed but above the surface, everything's fine? Is it really? Let us not drift from the truth of what Christ came to do.

And here is what leads to drifting. And it's the second point which is neglecting. At the root system of where drifting happens, it's neglecting. And here's what I mean. Drifting comes from neglect because there is a deeper power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is meant and intended to heal our whole selves and not just our choices or our active sin problems, meaning we like to reduce the idea of sin far below what the Bible actually understands it to be.

The Bible and our Christian tradition teach that sin is a whole complex reality of our very natures, of our living, of our being, and of the world. And yet, we've reduced sin to choices of things we were supposed to do but don't do, and things we don't do that we should do, and we like to make it an issue of choices, of moral ethics. And it certainly is that. But sin is so much bigger than merely those things or moral choices. In fact, Calvin would say, "The knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected. Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Without knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self." This is why he said this, because sin is the word Christians use to name not simply our failed acts but also our inner and outer captivity.

If we embrace a fuller understanding of the nature of sin, knowledge of self extends beyond our obvious actions of transgression or our insufficiency to save ourselves. Do you know that the gospel is so much more than that, so much more than our need for forgiveness and our inability to save ourselves? In fact, the reality of sin helps us to see just how big the gospel is, that it extends to every limit and failure of our lives. And it is our whole lives not just our actions. As one writer said, "God in Christ takes our sin that we may live forgiven, free, and whole." Do you see? Forgiven, free, and whole, not just forgiven. And if we neglect this truth that the gospel and its power and the power of Christ extends to the whole of life, and we neglect it, then what we end up doing is we become captives right back to the practice of sin.

And this is the very thing that the writer of Hebrews is trying to warn us against because he says, "For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" We have such a great salvation that it means to go way deep to the crevices that are uncomfortable and hard to look at. And if we don't know where we need the gospel because we're not reflecting on it, we're not thinking about it, we're not asking the questions, then we're actually neglecting the knowledge of God and His great salvation. To attend to the knowledge of God and to attend to the knowledge of self is to ask you, O Lord, by your power and by the gospel to come in. Save me from how I try to neglect the power that you bring at much, much deeper levels.

The challenge is for us that much of modern life does not reward us for going deeper. And here, I'm not talking about therapeutic psychology, that somehow, we like to think of it that way, or just naval gazing, or over importance on my emotions. That's not what I mean. It means to actually begin to ask questions about what's going on beneath the surface of our lives, of asking the questions that say, Lord, is there a place in my life, in relationships, or in my walk with you that I'm actually running from you? Or that I may be using even good things like fellowship or relationships to avoid you? Or places where I'll attend to the scriptures, but I don't want to go deeper to ask where I need to be healed? It's very easy even within the church to use God to run from God.

The writer of Hebrews says here when he declares, speaking of Christ,

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he 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. [ESV]

To hear those words is to give ourselves to the greatest power full of love and mercy and kindness who Himself says He's gentle and lowly in heart, who invites us to come to this place.

And here is the reality. When we begin to neglect what's going on underneath, I think we become very weary. We lack the energy and strength of the Holy Spirit to face everyday life. And when we lack the energy spiritually, we begin to look for the strength in other things materially, relationally, and circumstantially to help us fix what hurts. But what is called for is a deeper asking, Lord, how can you help me see what you are teaching me? This requires reflection.

As Rich Villodas says in his book *The Deeply Formed Life*, "Limited reflection usually leads to dangerous reaction. When there's no space to process our inner worlds, we find ourselves mindlessly and instinctually reacting to the world around us." Have you ever done that? I mean, I've done this.

I've done this in the last couple weeks. I won't get into details. But I remember calling PD, and I said, oh man, I am so mad about something. I mean, I was worked up. And I was like, "Talk me off the ledge, man. Talk me off the ledge." And I hung up. So when I got to see him, I was like, all right. Help me out. The point is that what was going on inside of me, why did that elicit such emotion? Thankfully, I had a brother in Christ who I could call and say, "Talk me off the ledge." Help me process this. Because I will tell you I am a good enough people person to show you all the good stuff while on the inside, I hide all the stuff I'm really angry about. But I also know this. The more I do that, the more likely I am to give a reaction to one of you that could bring hurt.

Do you experience that? Do you experience that with your children? Do you experience that with your spouse, a neighbor, or a friend? What does the gospel have to say?

Here's what I want to do this morning. I want to end this sermon with the third point of minding. And I want to do something a little different. I want to combine it with the Lord's supper. My third point is about the Lord's supper. As we think about what we're about to do here, we're about to do something which the Lord Jesus invites us to do mindfully and aware of what's happening. You see, when we come to this supper, when we come to this place, we're coming to get some food and drink. And just as He said to His disciples, He intended it to be an invitation to rest in Him because the meal pointed to who He was and what He does. And so He's inviting us to find rest. And He's inviting us to find rest from our weariness. And that weariness is not meant to be something that we just live in, but we need the Lord to renew us and to strengthen us.

And so we come back to this place. And a way we can mindfully do so is by asking, where am I trying to find strength for today? Where do I find a place where I can understand what's really going on underneath the surface but find healing and safety and peace and rest? It is in Jesus Christ alone. This table is not the table of Columbia Presbyterian Church. It's the table of the Lord. And He invites us to come back to this place to see what He has done but to do so with our whole self.

Here's what I mean by minding. I want to ask you to consider some questions as you come forward. And I'm actually grateful that during the pandemic, we're now getting up and walking forward. I know you might not be crazy about walking, but it's something we're choosing to do. And we're coming to the table, and we're taking something that's being offered, and we're going back. As you do so this morning, I want you to consider four questions.

First, what are you mad about? What are you sad about? What are you anxious about? What are you glad about? Now, maybe only one of those questions applies to you. Maybe all of them apply to you. Maybe only a couple do.

But here's what I want to say to this congregation. If you're visiting with us, this is kind of how I speak to the congregation. So here's the deal. CPC, this is not a performance. Do not think that you need to check off the box and dress up your clothes and get it all right before you come to the table because that is not the gospel. Coming to the table doesn't mean you wipe off your stink beforehand. This is made for stinky people. This is not made for the well dressed well educated got-it-all-together crowd. This is

meant to be a messy place because the one who has healing in His wings invites us. This means your whole self.

And so I'm asking you again, what are you mad, sad, glad, or anxious about? And whatever that answer is, when you come to the table, bring it with you that the Holy Spirit might reveal that to you. And know that when you take and eat, you can give that thing to Him because He's giving you something, and it can be an exchange. But what He gives you is far greater, for Jesus says, "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The part of being mindful is asking the questions. I encourage you to bring that thing. Bring the baggage before Him. Make it, discern it, look for it, and offer it to Him and say, Lord, have mercy and bring healing and peace. Mindfulness begins in the presence of the Lord saying, Lord, all that I am, all of it is before you. Heal. Bring peace.

And maybe today's the first time you're doing this. Some of you may feel like you're emotionally infantile and unable to really ask these questions. But before the Lord and the Holy Spirit and by His power which attests and does great things, He can bring it to life. And if there's something you're thankful for, praise God. If you're anxious about it, just bring it. Want to do this together? Let's do this together. Let me pray for us, and then we will begin.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for this supper. This supper is meant to be a celebration of what you have done and what you are doing. It is a celebration that you are not done with us and that your Holy Spirit means to lead us to a deeper place of healthiness and maturity that we might be saved from drifting and neglecting. Lord, this could be a day of renewal for many. And I pray that it would be a day that you would rescue us from neglect and drifting that we might come to you by your Holy Spirit and offer you these things. And as you feed us, may your Spirit bring healing, wholeness, freedom, forgiveness, and beauty because the gospel is at work. Help us, we pray. In Jesus's name. Amen.