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The Necessity of Giving Earnest Heed to the Things That Have Been Heard

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them. For if the word spoken through angels proved stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation? which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard; God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will" (Hebrews 2:1-4).

"See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not, when they refused him that warned them on earth, much more shall not we escape, who turn away from him that warneth from heaven: whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more will I make to tremble not the earth only, but also the heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, that those things which are not shaken may remain. Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe: for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:25-29).

Those words, of course, sound very terrible. They are almost like holding a threat over people, and you might feel that they are not too encouraging a beginning for a time like this. However, I have

read them with one object, and I think they constitute a very good starting-point for such a consideration as is before us at this time.

No one will question the solemnity of those words. There is something almost terrible about them. When you hear them you say: 'Well, you cannot, you dare not, fail to recognize that we are in the presence of something very serious. There really is something very serious on hand when such words have to be spoken.' We are not in the presence of some light, superficial, pleasant matter and interest. We are evidently in the presence of something momentous, something which, if it can be put into such language of *fear* - for it says "Let us fear": a solemn and terrible warning of the possibility of something awful happening - well, you don't talk like that about anything unless it is something of tremendous value, something of very glorious possibility and consequence. To miss that something is said to be the most terrible thing that could happen. Therefore it must be something tremendously important.

Now, I am not exaggerating, I am not making that up, but there you are. I have started at the beginning of the Letter: "Let us fear lest...". I have gone right over to near the end of the Letter where similar words occur again as summing up, and in between the beginning and the end you just have any number of these earnest entreaties, these solemn warnings and examples taken out of the life of others who did not give heed and go through, and what happened in their case?

Therefore I suggest to you that this Letter must be a very vital Letter. If that is the nature of it, the realm of it, if that is the portent, then there is something tremendous in view for Christians which can be missed. That is what it is all about.

For the present I will occupy my time mainly in talking about the Letter.

When you have language like this, when someone is speaking in this way and it is put on record, and turns out to be (allow me to put it in this way) not man writing or speaking, but God, you surely must be in the presence of a crisis. It must be a crisis that is on hand; that is, a terminal point on which, and at which, tremendous issues are at stake, one way or another. When you hear, something has got to happen. It is the ultimate that is brought to bear upon this moment, this situation.

We know, of course, that this Letter itself took its rise from a crisis, but it is impressive to realize that not only was it related to a historic crisis, but the Holy Spirit took hold of that and introduced the ultimate crisis, and built upon that the ultimate issue. Perhaps you need that explained.

The Historic Crisis

The historic crisis was this. This Letter was written probably about two years before that full scattering for the whole of this age of the Jewish people: the destruction of Jerusalem which the Lord Jesus had foretold. You notice, in our reading, things which were in the first place spoken by the Lord Jesus - "*Give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard*" - and some of the things which were spoken by Him related to this crisis. He said: "*The days will come, in which there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down*" (Luke 21:6). That terrible twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, spoken by the Lord, was bearing upon the thing which was now within a year or two of actual fulfilment, when the Roman legions besieged Jerusalem, brought it to starvation, destroyed its temple so that literally, according to a Jewish historian, they did not leave one stone upon another. It is on record that as they went about their work, they literally left the

whole thing on the ground. The temple was finished, all the temple worship was finished, the priesthood was finished, the sacrifices were finished, and the people were scattered to the ends of the earth, never to be fully recovered again in this dispensation. It has been according to the Lord's word: "*Behold, your house is left unto you desolate*" (Matthew 23:38). It has been like that these nearly two thousand years.

That is the historic crisis which is here - the shaking of the things of the earth that can be shaken.

The Ultimate Crisis

Now the Holy Spirit takes hold of the historic and superimposes upon that something bigger: the shaking of the heavens also, the heavenly things. Christianity as a whole will be shaken at the end. This is the end of one phase, but another phase is coming when everything in Christianity will be shaken to its foundation. This tremendous, two-fold crisis is the occasion of this Letter.

Why did the Lord cause this person, whoever he was - and we won't debate who he was - to write this Letter at that time? This is where it comes to us, and it ought to come with just as much force as it came to the Jews, or was intended to come to the Jews at that time.

The time will come, and it is fixed in the counsels of God, when everything in this creation and in this universe is going to be subject to a tremendous shaking. It is going to happen. Peter speaks about it in terms of the atomic age, as you know: "*The elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up*" (2 Peter 3:10). It is coming. And the issue is this: When it comes, what have we that will abide the shaking? What will come through it all and survive unshaken? What have we got that, let the greatest shaking in this universe come, can never be moved, will never go, will come out all right, unshaken - "a kingdom that cannot be shaken"? What have you got like that?

Getting On To Ground That Cannot Be Shaken

Now this Letter was written to these Hebrew Christians to try - and it was a great effort of the Lord - to get their feet established upon ground that could never be shaken. They were wavering, already being shaken and being moved from their steadfastness. Some of them were thinking of going back to the old associations and the old Jewish system, and the Lord inspired this Letter with the one object of getting them established, so established that when this terrific storm broke, these winds were let loose and so many and so much carried away, there would be that which would stand the storm and abide. As I have said, He used the historic as the occasion for bringing in the eternal. He leads on to this for all Christians.

Before the Storm Breaks

Now, dear friends, there are two things which are important for us to notice. One is this: that you cannot settle that matter when the storm breaks. If you have ever been in a really good storm you know very well that that is not the time to get things settled. If you have not got them settled before then, you are just going to be all at sea indeed. The forces will be far too much to cope with. You will just be thrown all over the place. An emergency is not the time to get quietly down to our foundations, for we are too much caught up in things. If it is not all settled beforehand, if you do not know where you are beforehand, you will not be able to see to it when this thing breaks. It is

important to recognize that. Therefore this Letter would say: 'In the light of testings which will come, in view of that which is bound to break upon us at some time, now is the time to make sure that our position is an absolutely sound one, an absolutely true one, and that there is nothing doubtful about our position at all, no question about it and we know where we are, that we are not at the mercy of other people's judgments and ideas. We know the Lord for ourselves. We know where we are. Let everything go to pieces! We know where we are with the Lord.' That is the thing that has to be settled, and it cannot be settled when everything is going to pieces.

The other thing that is important is that we should recognize that it may not be necessary for the great ultimate upheaval and chaos and cataclysm to take place in order to bring that issue out. Is not this the heart of every trial that comes into the Christian life? Any day there can come a temptation, or an adversity, some suffering, or some thing that is just calculated to throw you all over the place. In any such experience the question arises: What have I got of the Lord that is going to get me through this? What have I really got now of the Lord that will stand me in stead in this crisis? It may be something in everyday life, a family matter, a business matter, a church matter, or a personal matter, but it is something that is most testing, unsettling, upsetting. It comes like a shock or a blow and could knock us to pieces. What have we got of the Lord which will see us through and will not go with the wind, will not be carried away in this hour of trial, but will stand and remain?

That is the issue of this Letter, whether it is a historic crisis in the life of Israel, or Jewry, or in the ultimate experience of the Church. It is coming, and has already come to multitudes of people on this earth. It is the position today in a large part of the world, where the test is: What have we got that will see us through this terrible time? It is a question for many in the East today, but it is the ever-present question.

Lest We Drift Away

That is the message of this Letter, so it has to be solemn, it has to be serious, and it has to use words like this: "Let us give - we ought to give - the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them."

Now that is a poor way of interpreting the original language. Our English language just so often fails to give us the real sense of the words which were originally used. Here it is: "Lest haply we drift away from them", but the picture there in the original language is of a ship in rough water, with strong currents and heavy winds, and that ship is having a very difficult time and is trying to make calm water. There are moorings there in the harbour. If only she can make those moorings, lay hold on them and get moored up, she will be all right. Here she comes, but those responsible are a bit careless about it, and just as she comes up on the moorings they are too careless to grasp them, to lay hold of them and to fasten them, and she drifts past on to the rocks. That is actually the picture behind the words here - "We ought to give the more earnest heed... lest haply we drift away." You see, on this strong, adverse current of these conditions of trial, we can drift past through not being serious enough, not earnest enough, nor meaning business sufficiently. The moment comes when all might be well and we might be made fast and sure, but we drift past, carried on to lose what was there for us.

Now, you know that this whole Letter is built up on that idea. Read it again in that light. After its introduction, that wonderful presentation of the Lord Jesus, it says: "*We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away*", and you see what the consequences of

that are in this book. "The more earnest heed to the things that were heard." To me that is a key to this book. There are many arguments in it which might be taken out and used as the title, or key, to the whole book. A little further on there is this wonderful fragment: "How shall we escape, if we *neglect* so great salvation?" "So great salvation" might be a key to the book. You can read and study it in the light of that. And there are many other fragments like that which in themselves open up the whole book. "We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard." What things?

God Hath Spoken in His Son

You see how the book begins: "*God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son.*" Not by His Son. That is true, but it does not say that here. Yes, He spoke by His Son, but the real point here is that He has spoken *in* His Son. The Son is God's speech. It is not even what the Son says, but it is what the Son Himself implies, signifies, what His coming into this world, or being in eternity, represents of God's thought. God has manifested Himself, has made Himself known, revealed Himself, spoken for Himself Son-wise. Not the words of the Son only, but the Son Himself expresses God. If you or I could see the Lord Jesus, really read Him as a person, we would have all that God wants us to know, for it is all there. God has spoken in a person. He has embodied Himself for revelation in a person... 'hath spoken at the *end* of these days Son-wise'. You notice that the words 'in his Son' are in italics, which means that in the original those words do not exist. What is really there is this: 'God hath spoken Son-wise.' That is difficult to grasp and to understand, but, you see, it opens up everything. The rest of the book is an opening up of what Christ is, and all that has come from God in Him personally. We are not going further with that at the moment, but God hath spoken. In old times He spoke by angels, by leaders, by prophets, by priests and by numerous means and methods, signs and symbols and types, divers manners, a variety of manners, in different times and fragments. He has gathered the whole up now at the end. This is the last speech of God, but it is complete and full, comprehensive. It is the end - Christ.

"We ought to give the more earnest heed." If it was so serious when He spoke by or through angels, then it was tremendously solemn when He spoke in His Son. The angels were great beings, wonderful beings, but, as the Letter goes on to show, nothing in comparison with the Son. If when God spoke through prophets, or priests, or kings, or leaders, it was a solemn matter for the people - and it was a very solemn matter, a crucial thing for those who heard - how much more so when He spoke Son-wise! We ought therefore to give the *more* earnest heed when God speaks like this, and He has spoken to us like this. You see what it says: "*The word spoken through angels proved stedfast*". This so great salvation takes its greatness, its dimensions, its supremacy from the fact that Christ is so much greater than all. God has spoken to us in Him, but, you see, it is "*God bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit*".

Through the Apostles

I think there is something more to note about this for the moment. This Letter - so-called to the Hebrews - was written (if what we think is true) just before the year A.D. 70, when the destruction of Jerusalem finally took place. By the year 70 all the Apostles, with the exception of John, had gone to the Lord. They had done their work and had written their Letters. God had spoken concerning His Son through them all. Only John remained at this time. God had been speaking. Now it says here: "God... bearing *them* witness". To whom did God bear witness? To the Apostles - "by signs and

wonders... and gifts of the Holy Spirit". God was speaking concerning His Son in and through the Apostles, so that by the time this Letter was written there existed the major part of the New Testament literature. Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians existed. You look into all those and you see that it was God speaking concerning His Son. The Letter to the Romans opens almost with that very phrase: "*The gospel of God... concerning his Son*", and that is the message of that big book.

Now these are the things that were heard: God's speaking concerning His Son. You and I have that. We have all that God has said and is going to say in this dispensation concerning His Son. All that I am saying is only getting into what God has said. I am not adding anything to this revelation of Jesus Christ. It would be impossible to do that, and it would be a very terrible thing to attempt to do it. We are only, as the Lord enables, getting into what God has said about His Son in His Word. We have it all: all that God has said concerning His Son. What a tremendous thing it is that He has spoken to us by His Son! "We ought to give the more earnest heed", because tremendous things are bound up with this. I am not going further into that just now, for I am only talking around and on this Letter.

Making Sure of Our Calling

You see, it is a very critical thing for the Christian life. Not to the unsaved, for this Letter is not written to the unsaved, but to Christians. If you look into the Letter you will find that these Christians made a wonderful start. Reference is made to what they suffered for Christ's sake when they came to faith in Him. They suffered the spoiling of their goods - they suffered terribly. They made a tremendous start and there was no doubt about them being Christians. I repudiate any suggestion that this Letter was written to professing Christians and not real Christians. You don't talk to professing Christians in this way! What have they to lose? They have not got it to lose. The whole Letter is on what Christians may lose, and it is not a matter of losing their basic salvation. Let us say that at once but that will lead us further into the Letter. There is some tremendous thing that Christians have got to make sure of. It is not just their being basically saved, getting into heaven. The Corinthians were there, but to them the Apostle said: 'Look here, you Corinthians, the foundation is laid in you and you are on the foundation, but you may be putting up a tremendous superstructure which will go up in flames and in smoke and you will just get into heaven *so as by fire*.' Do you know what that means? Well, you may get in, but everything you have got will be lost and go up in smoke. You will get in naked. What kind of *abundant* entrance into the everlasting kingdom is that?

Well, of course, if you would be of this indifferent kind and say: 'Well, as long as I get into heaven, that is all that matters' you are completely out of tune with the New Testament. This Letter is saying: 'That is not enough. There is something immensely more than that to which you were called in Christ, and you have to make very sure about that... "Give the more earnest heed... lest".' *Lest!* How often that little word occurs in this Letter! Lest so-and-so be the result which God never meant for His people. He meant something so much more than that.

Well, I think we are going to leave it there now. We just stand on the threshold and survey this, and conclude with this word.

The Lord Wants Better Christians

Dear friends, the Lord wants much better Christians than many of us are. He does want a more solid type of Christian than is represented by the majority. Oh, the poor shape that the majority of

Christians make of this matter! What a poor representation and expression of Christ we are! Many know it and are not satisfied. Inside they know that all is not well. They know a lot of things, have a lot of teaching and doctrine, and church work, but there is such a poor measure of Christ. The Lord wants much better Christians, a better type, a better calibre, and this Letter is the Letter to make known what it is that the Lord wants, and therefore what it is that is possible, and to bring this tremendous emphasis: "Give the more earnest heed". That attitude is essential to being a better kind of Christian. It is not how it is put here, but it is what it amounts to. There are Christians and Christians, but the Lord would work hard with us to make a better kind of Christian. I would sooner put it this way - to have a far bigger expression of Christ in us than there is. He would work hard for that. That is probably why He allows us to have difficulties, trials and adversities. We have to secure a position where, without any kind of interference, of arguments and circumstances, or what the consequences would be, we are with the Lord, at any cost, for all that He ever meant when He called us into fellowship with His Son. An attitude like that will make tremendous things possible, and that is really the upshot of this Letter. Get right into line with all the purpose of God concerning His Son and you will be a different kind of Christian, and you yourself will count for very much more. The Lord will be with you and will commit Himself.

So we can see why the Letter opens up with putting the Lord Jesus in all His greatness right there in front. What a revelation of Christ is that first chapter! The Holy Spirit puts Him there, right at the beginning, in the first, supreme place, and then He says that everything else has to do with that, relates to that, and all these entreaties, exhortations and warnings relate to this: God has an immense purpose concerning His Son, and you are called into that.

May the Lord at least impress us with this: that the salvation into which we are called is a very much bigger thing than perhaps we have realized. It is a "so great salvation".