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DRIFTING.

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“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard [“that were heard,” R. V.], lest at any time we should let them slip [“lest haply we drift away from them,” R. V.]”—HEBREWS 2:1.

WHAT is easier than slipping, or letting things slip? We need not do anything to slip. On the edge of a stair, on an icy path, on a fruit-skin that has been carelessly thrown upon the pavement, on the polished floor of a room in which we spend half our time, we may slip and become cripples for life, if we live to be cripples. Or if it is not we that slip, a bit of food slipping may strangle us; a sharp knife slipping may cut an artery; a valued possession slipping may be lost to us; a priceless opportunity for doing or getting good may pass away beyond recovery.

What one of the great movements of our life is in itself less noticeable than drifting? Its sources are far away out of our sight, in arctic or southern seas, in tidal movements, in convolutions of the

coast, in irregularities of the ocean's bed, in storms that have been raging in other latitudes and longitudes than ours. The movement and pressure of the currents is quiet and noiseless. Things about us move with us, and we take less notice when all things pass on together. A cyclone so arouses and excites us as in extreme cases to paralyze us, and to take away the little power we had before the bursting of the storm. Drifting, we are lulled into a false security, and find, it may be, that at the last we cannot help ourselves in the false or perilous position into which we have—only drifted. On how many sandy beaches and rocky shores do hulks of goodly ships and bones of gallant men tell of the danger that is hidden in drifting! And when at the great day the sea shall give up its dead, who can count the hosts that shall come up out of its depths, because unsuspected currents bore them to the spot that was to be their tomb! The seamen may have been watching clouds, winds, the barometer, the compass—all but their charts; or, if their charts also, these were the work of half-instructed and finite men that could not know and record everything.

So in the social, political, intellectual, moral, and spiritual life of men drifting is one of the most constant and prolific causes of disaster. We might

fill our hour with instructive and impressive illustrations from biography and history. Nor need we be learned in these departments of literature before we can find apt and effective enforcement for this lesson from the record-book of human life. The memory of a child can recall many unfortunate or evil conditions and experiences into which he never went purposely, but was carried along unawares, giving himself up to the forces that moved him. There is no hour of the life of the oldest of us that has not felt the power of these currents. Well for us if we have taken timely and sufficient warning, and so escaped the jeopardy in which we were.

This aspect of human life is very distinctly brought before us in our text, and furnishes our simple and practical theme—*drifting*.

Some of the considerations that I shall urge bear with equal propriety and force upon the life of all; others find their full application only in the case of Christian men and the Christian life. There is need enough that men be put on their guard in respect to social, financial, political, intellectual drifting; our great present concern is with the moral and spiritual life.

There is a drifting which tells of disaster already experienced, while it renders further disaster more

probable. If her rudder-chains have given way, the powerful engines of the "Majestic" herself cannot keep her out of the trough of the sea or away from the ledges that line the coast. With a strong gale driving a vessel upon a lee shore, if her anchors find no holding ground she will soon be among the breakers. So in life there is a drift that lies midway between evil in the past and evil to come. Disabling calamity or overmastering vices may have made a man an easy and helpless prey to any strong current of influence that lays hold upon him. The lesson and caution of our text relate to a different class of phenomena—where power is not impaired or gone, but only not in use.

If we seek first for answers to the simple questions when, why, how we drift in so many things, in so many ways, even in the religious life, we shall better judge of the unworthiness and peril of it, and shall search more eagerly for a way of escape. Conscience will be aroused and give new emphasis to our text, as it teaches us that "*we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them.*" We shall feel the force of the "*therefore*" with which the text begins.

Drifting always gives token of power at work. The force that is acting may be diffused and not

concentrated; it is none the less force. It will be less noticeable if acting over a wide area; its pressure may at any given moment, at any given point, be more gently exercised; it may yet effect very substantial and serious results. A sudden blast coming upon us unnoticed might beat down or overturn the boat in which we were floating a moment before without apprehension. A few weeks ago I saw a miniature cyclone whirl rapidly over a small sail-boat that came directly into its path. The two occupants, seeing its approach, had, quick as thought, lowered their sail, dropped their anchor, thrown themselves down in the bottom of the boat, and were safe. Unobservant, one may drift very agreeably, under a gentle pressure, upon shoals or among reefs, and if wreck is escaped it may be a long and weary way back to the course on which he would be moving. It did not seem to be power that was carrying him out of the way; if it could be concentrated and measured, it might be found sufficient to sweep away massive barriers. Or it may be some hidden undercurrent that has taken us into its grasp. Of such the ocean must be full to keep the seas within the bounds appointed for them. In shallow waters, not showing themselves upon the surface, they may lay hold upon the vessel's keel and carry us whithersoever this unsuspected

governor listeth. There are many such undercurrents in life, more dangerous because hidden. So long as nothing upon the surface attracts attention and awakens us to vigilance and effort, we are too ready to presume upon our safety and remit our activity. No summer passes that does not bring from popular seaside resorts a gloomy list of deaths by drowning, due to the fact that unobservant and over-confident swimmers had fallen inadvertently into the grasp of a treacherous current that was too strong for them and gave its warning too late.

The social and individual life of man is full of currents and their effects. The movement of our life is not all toward chosen ends. It is not wholly under the dominion of clear present intelligence, and high and worthy principle and purpose. What we do, what occurs with us, is not always decided by our own deliberate and justifiable judgment, or indeed by any other specific and recognizable choice.

Personal habit is one of these currents. Our habits, even in the highest and most important concerns, are often formed, and become very persistent and controlling, without much warrant for satisfaction on our part in and with them. Good habit is a mighty power in aid of a worthy life when ends are wisely chosen and energies trained to work easily and almost automatically. But many of our

habits in every department of our life do not in any worthy way come into being, and into the place of control which they have gained for themselves. We do and continue to do until the doing becomes almost a second nature. Only under special inducement, and only with strenuous endeavor, do we act otherwise. And it might cause embarrassment and shame were we called to justify or apologize for our habit. Such acts and courses of action do not so much as attract our own attention, however it may be with the attention of others; they no longer summon us to deliberation; we have left behind in their case that serious discriminating criticism to which we may still subject distinct and new activities. How much of our life drifts in currents of individual habit!

General social usage is another current. Here it is not our own past action that has determined the kind of force or the direction of the movement that is bearing us along. It is the choice or habit of others, or some power more complex yet, by which we are encompassed and mastered and carried on, with very little consent or thought, perhaps without suspicion. We have passed neither intellectual nor moral judgment upon it. The pinch of conscience is felt the less, because it is what others are and do that so largely decides our doing; and our

conscience readily excuses itself from presuming to judge them.

Where we are all moving together it is so easy to take little account of the direction of the movement, or even of the fact that we are in motion. We are not drifting through or away from our environment, but with it; and we may need to look at some distant landmark to see in what course we are all going together. We shrink from being accounted odd or out of sympathy with our constant and necessary companions. We are unwilling to be thought censors of our friends.

Sometimes these social usages are of very large dimensions, covering wide spaces and long periods. Many influences have conspired to make them what they are. Their springs lie hidden in part in a distant past. We may be contributing our little quota of support to them now, but they were before us, and will be after us; we found them, we leave them behind; but for the time being we are in many ways and at many points subject to their pressure. It often becomes a delicate and difficult moral problem what our responsibility is in regard to them, not so much with respect to their existence, as with reference to our attitude toward them. Too often we raise no question; we only drift with them. Within this large and general social move-

ment there will always be found in every particular society or community forces at work creating a local drift, which may be quite distinct from or independent of the greater currents that bear men along. Contrasts become more marked, are more quickly noted, and will be more sharply criticised when one deviates from the custom of those close about him, and seems by his action to reflect upon the propriety of theirs. Therefore in the interest of peace and of good-fellowship one sometimes falls in with that which his immediate fellows do which he does not approve.

Even in limited and select communities (like our own) where conditions might be supposed to be at their best, where mental and moral faculties should be most cultivated and alert, where the sense of personal responsibility should be most highly developed and strongest, where men should most surely know what they do and why they do it, traditional usage, or temporary and local currents of some other sort, may suspend that searching scrutiny and that clear and well-defined individual decision which are so essential to high and right action. Our very sense of security in our favorable conditions may lead us to go unquestioning with the multitude. Our hand drops the helm and we drift. We quietly divest ourselves of responsibility, and

do what others do, and because they do it, instead of being vigilant and active in moral decision. We fall into the state of the people whom our Lord reproved with the question, "Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" We forget that we cannot so transfer responsibility to our neighbors or our circumstances, even the best, or sink ourselves in the mass to which we for the time belong.

These illustrations will sufficiently prove that there is a great deal of drift in this life of ours, omnipresent, incessant, and often of grave import, and show some of its sources and something of its nature. We are now ready to appreciate and estimate the unworthiness and the perils connected with such surrender of ourselves to the currents that may be sweeping about us and pressing upon us.

1. This drifting *dishonors and imperils manhood*, especially its highest type, Christian manhood. In it we resign some of our highest dignities as men; we sacrifice some of our most precious privileges; we throw away without consideration or equivalent some of the most essential safeguards of our welfare; we repudiate responsibility.

There is a spirit of the age very real and influential; we as men cannot be wholly independent of it, yet we need not be, nor can we properly be,

in unquestioning subjection to it. As social beings we must feel in a thousand ways the influence of the usages, movements, tendencies of the larger or smaller society in which we sometimes seem to be such insignificant units; but as men we are not the creatures, the vassals of these forces. In many things and in many ways we are moved involuntarily by others; we tend to move with others.

It is not true of all the currents in this social life which we live among our fellow-men that they are evil or tend to evil. It is often of the greatest advantage to us that we may have the benefit of very much in the social condition, and in the direction and volume of the movement of society, that we could never have produced, but of which we may avail ourselves to our great profit. But when we most congratulate ourselves on the prevalence of truth and right in the social order or movement of our age, or land, or particular community, it would be a poor tribute to pay the human sources, much more the divine Author of our advantages, if we on their account consent to be the less men. One need not be a man to drift; a log, a dead weed can do that, and violate no law of its being and forfeit no preëminence. And surely it is most unworthy of a man, and most perilous to manhood, to be borne this way and that, without attempt at con-

trol; without knowing or asking why and how and whither; and most of all in those spheres of life where manly endowments are of highest worth and responsibility presses most heavily.

We need not all aspire to be heroes in any distinctive way; yet there are heroic possibilities in all true manliness, and nothing is in stronger contrast with the heroic in character and action than habitual inadvertence, and the surrender of ourselves to the mastery of the currents that may chance to be prevailing about us. Quitting us like men, we shall at least not drift. The heroic stems strong currents and forces its way against them. It faces and withstands multitudes, instead of seeking them as its company and waiting for their suffrage or their practice as its criterion of truth and right; it can stand alone in its witness and its work; it is self-sacrificing rather than self-indulgent and compliant. The hero cannot be named who drifted to his noble service and its renown.

2. Drifting *puts in jeopardy all the important interests that are committed to our charge.*

As part of the plan of our life, drifting may be allowable as the occasional recreation of an hour on a summer holiday, when we thoroughly know our situation, and only seem to abandon all concern for the course and movement of our craft, our-

selves, and our agreeable companions. Even then he would be worse than foolish who should resign himself to forces and conditions of which he knew nothing, and with which it was not in his power at any moment to deal intelligently and resume the dominion that he had never really renounced. But in the more serious relations of life, in which there is no holiday putting us off duty, suspending the responsibilities and the issues connected with our many momentous trusts, it is much more impossible that we divide accountability with—we know not what. Unless we proclaim ourselves utter fools we cannot assume that the currents to which we resign ourselves will care for us and our concerns (they are *ours*) as well as or better than we ourselves. If it is not true that all currents in life are evil or tend to evil, neither may we presume that all are good or tend to good. Be they ever so good, they are not charged with our affairs, nor may we form a partnership with them, sharing risks and profits. The conduct of the business of our life belongs under God to us.

Alert and in the exercise of all our powers we are weak enough, and have difficulties and oppositions enough to overcome. And faithfulness is faith in what? In the currents about us? So far as we are fully engaged in and faithful to that which is

committed to our charge, and him who has committed it to us, we may trust, under divine guidance, to be brought in due time to our desired haven. But winds and seas will not bring us there of themselves. A south wind blowing softly may give place to Euroaquilo, and we be "driven to and fro in the sea of Adria," escaping like Paul and his fellow-voyagers with but our lives. Gentle currents may lead on to plunging waters, seeking exit this way and that, among the ledges that would block their course. In a good boat, with four sturdy pilots at the wheel, one may pass, as thousands do every summer, with nothing more than a pleasurable excitement, over the rapids at Lachine, and smile at the black rocks and the boiling waters that surround him. Drifting over that same course there would be little chance that those rocks (on which one's epitaph could never be written) would prove anything less than perpetual uninscribed monuments to the folly which would surrender itself to the currents that but a little way above flowed so smoothly.

Drifting will not accomplish for us any part of the appointed work of life; will not build up holy character; will not correct distortions or supply deficiencies; will not enrich us with treasures of knowledge and wisdom; will not stamp upon us

the image of Christ; will not fulfill any duty of ours to other souls. The world, society, will not be the better for our drifting through it or in it. The salt parts with something of its former saltness. Losing something constantly, as we drift, of the possible vigor and quality of our former character, how shall we tone up other's characters? How shall we help others to profounder reverence for truth or more controlling respect for principle while we are dismissing truth and principle from their ascendancy over ourselves? Our gains as we fall in with the current are wholly illusory; our sacrifices are real and serious, and may easily become irreparable.

3. A graver aspect yet of such a life is *its disloyalty to God, and the peculiar dishonor which it puts upon Christ*. These are the points specially emphasized in our text.

God has not so fashioned us, and so endowed us, and so watched over us, and so had pity on us and paid the costly price of our redemption, that we might give ourselves over to inadvertence and inactivity. We cannot overestimate his rights of control, and the reality of his efficiency in the world of nature and of men. But we may misjudge the nature of his working, as we surely do if we take all the currents that are stirring among

men as exponents of his will, and fancy that we most submit ourselves to him when we most completely resign ourselves to them.

We are to deal personally with him, and not in masses. "Acquaint now thyself with him, that it may be well with thee." His communications address themselves to our intelligence and sensibility and conscience and will, and summon them to their highest exercise. However many may with us be subject to his law, it is not our doing what others about us, few or many, may be doing that proves intelligent loyalty to him. If his providence over us is particular and his discipline of us individual, and the call of his Spirit and his enlistment of us in his service contemplate our gifts and opportunities, then nothing less personal and resolute and exclusive than the question, hourly renewed, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" at all meets the conditions of the case. The asking must be ours, and the interpretation of the coming answer ours, and the decision ours, and the discharge of duty ours. We cannot drift on any current into true obedience to the will of God. And so to deal with him is to deny him. To float on the stream is neither to remember nor to surrender to his personal demands upon ourselves. It substitutes another rule and method of living.

All the connections of our text in the chapters that precede and follow remind us that God's chief and final communications to men are those made by his Son, and his chief requirements those made in behalf of his Son. His nature, his position and relations, his appointed offices and work, exalt him above all, whether men or angels, prophets or ministering spirits, to whom God had given other commission. He who demands of angels (all the angels of God) worship of the Son does not ask less of men. If we respond by giving up the control of our life, even in part, to any chance influence that may be stirring about us, it is not manhood only that we lightly esteem, it is not our own interests simply that we treat most indifferently and heedlessly imperil. Our disloyalty concentrates itself upon him who has been made the rightful Lord of our life, to whom it should all pay tribute. It is the testimony of Jesus of which the Scriptures are full. A life ruled by regard for that which is for the present easy and agreeable is strange dealing with the exalted Son, a strange requital of what he has done for us.

If all this be so, we cannot put too strong an emphasis on the affirmation of our text: "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard."

Here is the affirmation of a dangerous possibility : we may drift away from the things that were heard when God spake in heaven and from heaven. If we do, where are we ?

Here is the assertion of a strong obligation : we ought to give heed, to give heed more abundantly. It is not a mere intimation of propriety or a suggestion of expediency, it is a necessity that is announced. No fugitive seriousness of thought and solicitude, no pondering for a moment, no glancing at the situation, no mild pang of regret over our error and folly and sin, will be fair dealing with the case or will save us. Earnest heed is a necessity ; "*we must.*" And earnest heedfulness is not enough ; it must be rightly directed, and concentrated upon the things that most demand remembrance and the treatment to which they are entitled. No word of God may be lightly dealt with, and then put aside as having no more value for us. But there are words of his spoken of old to and of the Son that should rivet memory and thought, of which we should never lose sight. Drifting away from them is, above all other drifting, monstrous, impious, ruinous—monstrous dealing with truth and fact ; impious treatment of him who spake, and of him of whom he spake ; ruinous dealing with our own well-being. It was then and there, when the Most High

so uttered his voice, that our duty was most clearly and unmistakably made known; then and there that the Saviour and his salvation were announced and offered; then and there that we learned who and what is our God, and who and what the Son of God, in his essential glory, his original and his conferred and acquired rights, his claims upon the allegiance of men.

Here is the choice that is offered us: subjection to Jesus Christ, and experience of his power to guide and save; and, on the other hand, drifting, to be guided and blessed and saved—by whom or what? Yet so inconsiderate are we, so ready to take our ease, so fond of floating on the current of the hour, so unmindful of our interest, so insensible to our true honor, so little impressed with our accountability, so little loyal to God, so unstable in our devotion to Christ, that even here we drift away, and because it is only drifting hardly notice it.

The *therefore* of our text should bring us to ourselves; that should rebuke and shame our inadvertence, our easy deference to custom, our weak compliance with what is common, popular, current about us, our giving account so little to God or to ourselves of what we are or do. In the presence of him who spake from heaven no heed will be felt to be untimely or excessive, no reverence too pro-

found, no homage too adoring, no trust too absolute, no obedience too careful and scrupulous, no consecration too entire and comprehensive. Abiding in the presence of these mighty and glorious truths, we may hope, through the greatness of God's grace, to be carried on the full tide of their power into the presence of the King, to the rest that remaineth.