

**THE SERMONS, LECTURES, AND SONGS OF
SIDNEY EDWARD COX**

Sermon: *The Peril of Drifting*
Epistle to the Hebrews - Chapter 2, Verses 1-3.

Editorial Note: The exact date and location of this sermon are not certain, but some clues do exist. This audio is of somewhat poor quality, but it is audible.

From 1960 – 1962, Sidney Cox served on the teaching faculty of the Toccoa Falls Bible Institute in Toccoa, Georgia. He was approximately 75 years of age at the time. His beloved wife, Violet was approximately 67 years of age.

During his tenure at the institute in Toccoa, he taught a lengthy course on, The Epistle to the Hebrews, which he recorded and which have been transcribed for this collection elsewhere. In that series of classroom lectures, we saw Sidney Cox in a much different role from the one in which he is often remembered. Those lectures had a distinct academic feel to them. They were tightly scripted and timed, were definitely geared toward “students,” complete with assignments for memorization, test instructions, etc. They contained few personal stories or insights, there was no reference to his music and they lacked the emotion and passion for which he was so well known. What they did reveal was a remarkable working knowledge of the scripture and ability to teach and enable students to understand and discover the truths of the Bible. In summary, there, we saw Sidney Cox, the teacher as opposed to Sidney Cox, the preacher.

In this sermon, Sidney Cox refers to his congregation as, “Randolph Street.” In 1963, Sidney and Violet Cox left Toccoa Falls and retired to Detroit, Michigan, to reside at The Eventide retirement residence operated by The Salvation Army. The Eventide was located on Park Avenue, 3 miles from a Randolph Street in Detroit.

Sidney Cox remained in wide demand as a Bible teacher and preacher during his retirement in Detroit. My guess is that this sermon was delivered to a congregation on Randolph Street in Detroit. What is interesting is that he takes the same teaching outlines on The Epistle to the Hebrews that he used in his classroom at Toccoa Falls, and assumes a completely different role – that of the passionate, demonstrative preacher. The occasional sound in the background of this sermon is him pounding the pulpit with his fist – just an example of the passion with which he delivered this sermon.

J. Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney and Violet Cox. February 2009.

.....then, Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews. I don’t want you to quarrel with me, and I won’t quarrel with you if we say that. But for the moment, let’s leave it, the Letter to the Hebrews. My subject this morning is, “The Peril of Drifting.” This is a message that I

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gave in embryo at any rate down in our Thursday morning Bible classes, where we have been studying this great book.

The first three verses of the second chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. Listen to them once more:

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. But if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him.”

We should not only preach the gospel to sinners, we should not only explain the way of life to the saints, but we ought to be equally faithful in the words of warning that we find all the way through the Word of God. The preacher is not a faithful preacher who avoids the warnings and speaks only of the lovely and pleasant things.

On this last Sunday morning, we want to consider together one of the great warnings of scripture, one of the dangers, the red flag is being raised before us. And I'm not doing it. I'm not raising any red flag. There's a red flag that is being raised, and it comes from out of the heart of the Word of God. And it is just as applicable to the friends in Randolph Street, as it was to those to whom it was originally written. There is not only joy in the Christian life, there is danger, as well. There is not only beauty and loveliness in it, there is peril in it, as well. And we ought to be aware of it, and be governed accordingly.

These words that we have read together this morning express one of the perils of the Christian life. You will notice that we ought to give the more earnest heed to something, lest something of very great value should slip away from us. Drift is the word that ought to be there; far better word than the one that's there in the translation, Lest at any time, certain valuable things should *drift* by us, and lest we as well should *drift* by and away from certain very valuable things.

Now, let me remind you, if you please, of the thing that we were saying last Sunday. And that is that the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ stands right in the center of God's program of redemption. But the cross has two sides to it. There is the side in which the sinner is particularly in view. There is the other side in which the saint is particularly in view. As you stand on this side of the cross, you hear a voice saying, “Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”¹ As you stand on this side of the cross, you hear a voice saying, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”² I've got a job for you. I have a purpose and a plan in mind.” And you hear the voice resonant...on this side of the cross. You hear a voice on this side saying, “He is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by him.”³ On this side you hear him

¹ Matthew 11:28.

² Matthew 4:19.

³ Hebrews 7:25.

saying, "He is able to keep that which we have committed unto him against that day."⁴ Able to save. Able to keep. Able to redeem. Able to send out into paths of righteousness and service. Able to save from the enthrallment of sin. Able to keep us spotless from a world that is all the way around us and would seek to soil our garments.

And as you stand in the center of the cross and look on both sides, you see God's full plan of salvation. The part of it that has to do with the sinner. The part of it that has to do with the saints. As you look on both sides of the cross, and you think of the word for the sinner and for the saint, you find that it follows a definite plan. There is a definite program of instruction. Here you find three things that are always said and in this order: First, there is instruction. Then, there is exhortation. Then, there is warning. Here on this side, you hear God through the word, telling those who have not accepted Christ as Savior how to become a Christian. You hear the warning there, the exhortation, that this is a matter of urgency. They ought to do it right now. Then you hear the word of warning, if they fail to receive the instruction and to heed the exhortation, then the result is inevitable. If you sow to the flesh, you shower the place with corruption. And here on this side, you find three things - instruction, exhortation, and warning. When you stand on this side, and the saint is particularly in view, you'll find exactly the same thing. You find the great body of truth that has instruction to the saints. It has exhortation to the saints. We should not only know things, but we should become something because of what we know. We should do things because of what we have become.

Then, in addition to that, there is the word of warning to the saints; that something may be lost because of unfaithfulness. Just as there is something of infinite value that may be lost on this side, because we refuse and reject God's word and God's plan, and a tremendous and terrible loss may come. When we turn onto this side, we find there is a loss that may take place, unless we give constant and urgent heed to the things that we know. And this loss will come in the form of a gradual drifting away from things that are infinitely precious. Now this is the word of warning that comes to us through the Word of God. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written particularly from this side of the cross, with the saint in mind. And so you find all the way through the Epistle these three great things are underscored - instruction, exhortation, warning.

There are five great and tremendous warnings that are found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The first one is the one we shall consider this morning - the peril of drifting. That automatically leads to the next one - the peril of unbelief. And that one automatically leads to the others. These five warnings of the Epistle to the Hebrews are not five isolated words that have no relationship to each other. They are five links in a chain. They are automatically, organically related, the one to the other. One leads inevitably to the other. And the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to the saint rather than to the sinner.

Now, I want you to notice, if you please, how this pattern follows. How we find the instruction, then the exhortation, and then the warning. We read in our class this

⁴ II Timothy 1:12.

morning, and I expect a number of you did, read the first chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. I was so glad that we did, because it's prepared the way a little bit for what I want to say right now. When you turn to the opening of this great book, you find that there are six great facts that are emphasized in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Hebrews. Six great facts, listen to them.

The first fact is, God. God is. "God, who at sundry times and diverse manners has spoken in times past by the prophet."⁵ It starts with the vision of God. Not an explanation of God. Not an apology about God. Not an argument about God. The fact of God. It stands at the portal of this great book. God.

The second great fact is that God hath spoken. Now the reason why we find that emphasized here, particularly in a message to the saints is because the way in which God may speak varies. God has many voices. He speaks through creation. You will find that there are, "Sermons in stones and books in running brooks" as one poet has graciously said it.⁶ But he's talking about things after the flesh. You will not find any message of redemption in running brooks. You will not find any shed blood by turning stones. Not at all.

God has a different way of speaking when he wants to talk with us about redemption, when he introduces the thought of the Lamb of God and the blood of the Lamb shed for the redemption of the world. God's voice of creation is one thing. God's voice of redemption is another. God speaks to us, of course, in his general Word, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth at his handiwork."⁷ You can hear the sound of his voice in the whispering of the trees. You can hear the music of the leaves of the trees as they clap their hands. You can hear the orchestras of heaven playing in the trees. Of course you can. You can hear the voice of creation.

But a sinner wants more than that. When the Holy Spirit is beating at the heart of a sinner, pointing him there to the fact that his sin and arousing him to this thought of his responsibility for his sin, that sinner needs more than the shining of a star in the heavens. He needs a cross on which a great, and altogether lovely, and worthy substitute died for him. That's the voice of God in redemption. And consequently we are finding here that God is speaking in his Son. He hath spoken. That's the second great fact, that this is a message that has to do with the redeemed, those who belong to the family of God. This is a message that is addressed to those who are heirs of salvation and who are spoken of as "beloved" and "holy brethren" and words like that. This is a message for the family circle of God.

And consequently you hear, this great redemptive message that comes in this book, spoken unto us in his Son. That's the third great fact. Lest we should have any doubt of actually loveliness and glory of the Son, the Father causes the Holy Spirit to flash before our eyes, an inexpressibly beautiful and magnificent picture of the Son of God, so that we

⁵ Hebrews 1:1.

⁶ From *As You Like It*, by William Shakespeare.

⁷ Psalm 19:1.

can see him altogether lovely. You will find over and over again. Forgive me for this expression that I'm going to use, but you will find many and many a times, God the Father bragging about his Son. Here is _____, when God the Father loves to pull his veil on one side and lift up before us the portrait of his lovely Son, and say, "Look at him, look at him, look at him. Did you ever see anything like this? Did you ever see anybody like him? You will never see anybody like him. He is the expression of the person of God. He is the one who declares the Father when he reveals the Father's grace and truth and glory. Look at him." And that's the fourth great fact.

And then, lest there should be any with small minds who would dare to compare this indescribably lovely One with any, no matter how exalted they may be, the comparisons of the Epistle to the Hebrews start at the top of the ladder. And we are told, "He is better than angels."⁸ No angel that can compare with him. And if angels can not compare with him, how can the sons of men ever compare with him? And that's the next of the great facts of Hebrews.

And the third one, or the next one, the sixth one, is the first mention of salvation in this great book - "We are heirs of salvation."⁹

Now there are the six facts; keep them in mind: God is, God hath spoken, God hath spoken in His Son, God describes His Son, God compares His Son with angels, He is altogether lovely, God mentions us as the heirs with his Son, of all the glory and values of salvation. These six great facts.

Does that matter? Have I just been reciting six ordinary things that are common place affairs that everybody knows? Have I wasted my time, thus? I'm quite sure I haven't. Have you seen something there? If you haven't, the moment that you turn to the second chapter of this book, the moment you turn to the next word in the second chapter of this book, it is as if God gets you by the shoulders to shake the _____ out of us, and turn our faces back again, so that we might see once more the loveliness of this panorama that he has spread before us. "Therefore, because of this we ought to give the more earnest heed."¹⁰

"Heed" is a word that has two sides to it - hear and look. Look and listen, and unless you do both, you don't heed. When we heed, we both look and listen. "Therefore, we ought to look and listen." How? Is there anything told us here as to how we ought to look and how we ought to listen? "Therefore, we ought to give the more earnest heed." You know that word in the original that says, "We ought" is a much stronger word than that. It would be much more nearly correct if it said, "We must give the more earnest heed." This is not a matter of option at all. This is not a matter of we may or we may not, if we feel like it, we ought to give the more earnest heed if it's a nice morning and not quite so hot as it is this morning. If the circumstances are pleasant, we ought to give earnest heed. We ought to do this. Not "ought," but we "must" give a more earnest heed.

⁸ Hebrews 1:4.

⁹ Hebrews 1:14.

¹⁰ Hebrews 2:1.

Look at that word, “earnest” there. “The more earnest heed. It has two sides to it again. It means that we look and listen first with intensity, and second, with consistency. The troubles of our hearing and our looking as a rule is the fact that we look at things so idly, so flippantly, and we hear so intermittently that the great thing that lies before us passes by unheeded. We ought to look with intensity. We ought to look with consistency, not just once in awhile, but constantly; every day, every moment to this precious thing. What precious thing? The fact of God, the fact that God has spoken, the fact that God has spoken in His Son, the loveliness of the Son, who is superior to angels, and the fact that in Him, God has made the redeemed joint heirs with Him in all the riches of salvation. If that doesn’t turn us back and set us back on our heels and put a sparkle in our eyes and an urgency in our lives, what in heaven’s name will? That’s what this book is saying, “I want you to turn back and look at these things again. Look at them again. You’re going to turn in the opposite direction in a moment, and dive into a pathway that is strangely dotted with failure, a pathway that is lined with darkness and shadows. How are you going to ____ travel that pathway? You’re going to do it in the light and glory of this vision. You’re going to stand there, line up, until it wraps itself around you. And then in the glow and glory of it, you’re going to face the opposite direction and take something of His radiance out into the darkness of this other pathway.” That’s what he’s saying. We are to give the more earnest heed. Why? Doesn’t everybody give heed here? Is there an element of danger about this?

Listen my dear, all you dear, dear, folks of Randolph Street, or wherever you belong - do you know that the things we’ve been talking about this morning can very easily slip away from us? I know folks, and you know folks - the vision of God use to be a tremendous, urgent, constant thing in their lives. That vision of God has faded out into an indistinct blur somewhere on the margin of their lives. And they’re not urgently and insistently aware of Him anymore. We have been removed from this side of the cross to this side. The fact of our salvation can not be disturbed by the attack of Satan. But the purpose of our salvation can most certainly be attacked and is, and that’s the very warning that is here before us this morning.

Folks who you _____, they’re urgent in their conception and longing after Him. He was an urgency in their lives. It’s not there anymore. He’s an indefinite blur on the horizon somewhere. He used to be in the center, now He’s marginal.

Do you know that that’s one of the easiest things to happen in a Christian? You know it, and I know it. And I’ll tell you why I know it...because I’ve been through it. I’ve been through it, whether you have or not. I know what I’m talking about, whether you do or not. I do. You take the vision of the Son, and the sound of His voice - there was a time when we listened with those ears and those eyes...to the music of His voice; we loved it. There wasn’t a moment when we didn’t eagerly seek but somewhere, some place where we could hear the music of his voice, the loveliness of that voice like the sound of many waters. You know that that can fade away, until the sound of that voice becomes indistinct? You don’t need me to go down the line. You don’t need me to do anything about it at all. This book is warning us about the fact that we ought to give heed, listen,

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and look with intensity and consistency, lest something of tremendous value just fade away and become an indistinct blur somewhere on the horizon. Don't tell me it doesn't happen. We've been in this business for forty years. I know what folks, what happens to people when they take their eyes off Jesus and off The Book and off the church and off to what we speak of as the means of grace. I know what happens to them, and so do you. So do you.

How does it happen? All at once? Does it come as some great decision of catastrophe? Does somebody say, "Well, there use to be a time when in my life the vision of God and the wholeness of God, and the loveliness of His Son, and the glory of His provision greater than angels - this was the thing that I was occupied with. But there came a moment when I said, 'This decision, I am going to put this all into a secondary place, and I'm going to let something else come into the center of the picture.'" Is that the way it happens? No, no, no. No one ever says that. The person in whose life this great vision is now secondary, used to be first, now it's off on the margins; that thing happened by a slowing, insidious process that is described in this book by the word, "drifting." Somebody has said drifting is the easiest...**(15 quiet seconds on the audio track)**...note of our demise out on the front steps? Not at all. What happened to them? A slow, insidious, scarcely noticed process began that is spoken of here as, "drift." And they went on and on and on until presently something of tremendous value was secondary instead of primary.

I also hold and dignify this morning that I can't tell you a story? I'm going to tell you a story. A story that I _____ hesitate to use that word.....lived many years ago owned a fleet of ships - three or four of them. And these ships use to fly between the home port and far distant places. They would carry a cargo of merchandise to a distant place, and when this was unloaded, they would then ____ reload cargo to bring back again...

(There are technical problems with the original audio track at this point. At a later date, Sidney Cox, using his reel-to-reel recorder, re-recorded the final section of this message and that now follows.)

Let me repeat that quotation about drifting. It is worth listening to and worth hearing again. Drifting is the easiest and most delightful way of dying. And those of us who've been in Christian work for any length of time, we all know that the path of the Christian church is strewn with wreckage of individuals and churches, who at one time were alive and a light with power for God; but have lost the light and lost the power and are now drifting along on some lower level of inactivity and ineffectiveness, and we can see it everywhere.

Let me tell you a little story. I'm quite sure that you're not too old to listen to a little narrative here. Let me tell you about a merchant man, who had a fleet of ships that he used to send out to far distant ports. Put a crew in charge of them. They would carry cargo to the far distant place and deliver it there, and then would carry back another cargo of merchandise to be brought back to the home port.

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On one occasion, this merchant man sent a ship out with its crew with definite instructions that they were to go to a certain port and there unload the cargo and deliver it, and then load again with another, with other merchandise that was to be brought back again, and were to come back as quickly as possible to the home port in order that schedules might be kept, and that the vessel might be used again for another trip without any delay. And, the instruction was very carefully given to them, "Watch yourself on the way back. There are storms that may arise, and there is the danger in the ocean of currents that are strong, and unless you are constantly vigilant, these undercurrents may grip the ship and carry it off its course and away from its destination."

The crew carried the vessel to its first port, unloaded the cargo, and then on the way back, brought a fresh supply of merchandise. On the way back, the ocean, beautiful and calm; the winds favorable, no particular problem there. And it was a long and tedious trip back, and after a while these men began to say to each other, "Why should we be constantly watching here? There isn't any danger here. There's no storms here. Why couldn't we take a little recreation? Why can't we have a little fun together? And have a little amusement? Why should we be constantly watching here? After all, we can put one man to do the watching." And so this is what they decided to do. Of course, it wasn't difficult to find a pack of cards, or to turn the deck into a bowling alley, or something of the kind, or its equivalent. And this is what they did.

And after a while, they conceived the idea, that they could put a little extra paint on the vessel, take the sails down and color them red, yellow, and blue or something of the kind in order to improve the appearance of the vessel. But all the time, while their recreation was going on, and while their improvements was going on, something else was going on down in the depths of the ocean. These currents were now gripping this vessel and had been carrying it way off its course and miles beyond the place where it should have been. And when they discovered this, that they were a long way away from their destination, and far off their course - when they discovered this, they also discovered that it was not easy to turn a vessel around and go back again against the currents and against the winds. But this they did, and finally after long delays, they arrived back in their port again.

And when they made their, gave their word, and made their report to the owner, and told him of the difficulty that they had run into, but pointed out what they had been doing in the way of improving the look of the vessel, he didn't seem to be one bit interested in that. What he was interested in was the fact that these men had failed at the point of total obedience and at the important point of watchfulness. And he said to them, "I shall not be able to trust you with a vessel again. I can only trust men who are faithful in their total obedience to the instructions they receive and are constantly watchful. I shall not be able to trust you again. I can find a job for you around the wharf and in the warehouses and so on. I can give you a job cleaning up here or repairing there. But I'll not be able to trust you with a vessel again." And these men faced this situation.

Now, with that simple little story, we do not need to apply it, do we? Because all we have to do is to look into the Word of God and you can find churches that are a light and

alive with power that eventually drifted out, down into nothingness. You can find men, like Demus, who use to be, but were not anymore. Men who were faithful, but who were not faithful anymore. And, we do not need to apply it. What we need to do is to be aware of the fact that there is a danger, not only surrounding our church, but surrounding our own individual lives. Because as we were saying before, this road of the Christian church is dotted everywhere with wreckage of men who used to be in the forefront of power for God, but something changed. And instead of being where they were on the high levels, they are now down, drifting down onto the low levels of mediocrity.

And what you can say of individuals, you can say of churches. This is so everywhere. And so we find it not only in the Bible, but out of it in our own observations. And I'm not going to apply this to this congregation this morning. Not at all. We can do our own applying. And I'm quite sure of this, that the Holy Spirit can apply this to our hearts, and arouse us with a sense of the importance of our obedience and of our vigilance and of our watchfulness for their own personal lives, and for the church that we love so much. And so I'm going to leave it there. The message has been delivered. You have heard it. I shall not attempt to decorate it. I shall not attempt to add to it. Not at all. But to leave it as it is. There is a danger. There is the danger that comes to the Christian church and to the Christian individual of drifting.

Now, drifting as we have noted leads to something else, because drifting always leads to neglect, which is the second of these warnings that we find in the Epistle to the Hebrews. And when we turn to this third chapter, we find two more of these warnings - the warnings against lack of hearing, so busy listening to something else that we can not listen to the voice of God. And the next of the warnings is that when we fail to hear and fail to obey, something happens to our hearts, and hardness of heart always results.

And then in the fourth chapter and at the end of the third, we've got the fifth of these warnings, the warnings that we may fall short of, "The rest" that God has provided.

And so we'll leave it there. We have heard the Word. We have listened to the exhortation. And we'll just leave it there, and pray that the Holy Spirit may be able to apply it to our hearts, to our eternal prophet, and for the glory of God. Supposing we look into our own hearts and keep our eye on our own church, and in a moment of silent prayer, commit ourselves, and our church, and our need, and the danger into the hands of the One who can handle it for us and the only One who can thus handle it for us, into the hands of the Holy Spirit himself. A moment of silent prayer, if you please.

We shall be concluding our service by singing our closing hymn. But in the meantime, good-bye and God bless you all.