

“ASK FOR THE OLD PATHS”

People like things that seem new and novel. We tend to cast aside things that seem old and common. Increasingly, our culture doesn't seem to show a lot of respect for anyone or much of anything that we consider to be old.

Leviticus 19:32 “Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man...”

We tend to do the opposite today, and disregard the aged. We dismiss what they say as outdated and irrelevant. But the Bible teaches that our elders are to be looked to for instruction, wisdom and counsel. It's also true that what's new is old and what's old is new. That is, when somebody touts something as being new, you'll usually find that they are recycling something that has been seen or heard before. They might be putting a different suit of clothes on it, but really it's not new. There really is no such thing as a *new* false doctrine, for example. It's all been said or tried in one form or another at some point in the past. That which is old is often discarded and so long forgotten that when we see it, it seems new and novel to us.

Well, the ancient truth of God is that way. There is no such thing as a *new* truth because God's word is truth.

John 17:17 “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

A long time ago, the prophet Jeremiah urged the people of God to return to the past, to go back to their roots and to rediscover God's truth and live according to that truth.

Jeremiah 6:16 “Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.”

Now, before you tune me out as being outdated, a relic or irrelevant, I hope you'll listen to what Jeremiah is pleading with these people of old to do. The very words of Jeremiah in this passage are enough to invoke a sigh or a roll of the eyes, because we live in a day when few people value that which is old. We think of things that are old as being out of date and irrelevant. Surely new is better. Surely as time goes on, we improve on things and we progress, not regress. But that's not necessarily the way that God—the eternal, unchanging God—looks at things.

In Jeremiah's day, God's people found themselves at a crossroads. They were about to walk right into the flames of God's judgment, and God was ready to punish them because of their moral corruption, their sexual sin, their unbelief and their apostasy. Their leaders were unjust and corrupt, and their enemies were closing in. Jeremiah was called “the weeping prophet” because his warnings were soaked in pleading tears, and he knew that God's hand was stretched out against Jerusalem and the city was about to be turned over the Babylonian captivity. The invasion of their city was imminent, but it wasn't too late to stop it. Jerusalem could still be delivered, but the nation was at this very moment at a critical

crossroads. Would they continue on in sin, the way they had been headed, on to destruction, OR turn back to the old paths where their fathers had walked and where they could find “*rest for their souls?*”

Jeremiah calls the old paths “*the good way*” and he’s talking about the paths of respect for and obedience to the law of God. Now, there were times when the people were faithful to God and they revered His law, and God blessed them for it. But now, those days were long gone and God’s people were about to see the awful result of their apostasy. They had chosen a path that had appeared good to them, but was unfamiliar, and had shunned the paths of old. They would pay a very heavy price for walking the path of proud obstinacy as opposed to the path of humble obedience. I wonder what the weeping prophet would say to the church today. I wonder if Jeremiah would be impressed with the new and novel things of religion. What would he say as he saw churches going after every new thing and the cheap thrills and gimmicks that have taken the church community by storm over the last several years? As he looked and saw churches even embracing sin and immorality, calling evil things good and good things evil, what would he say? The Old Testament prophets were sent to warn of coming judgment, not to affirm apostates in their sin. And Jeremiah was not a seeker-sensitive, flexible, go-along-with-the-crowd charlatan. He preached what the Spirit of God inspired him to preach. In this case, it was a plea for God’s people to return. Could it be if he were here, speaking in this age of godlessness, scriptural apostasy and moral rot, speaking to this confused postmodern generation, that he would shed tears anew and make that same plea: “***Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.***” His words echo down the corridor of time so clearly, it is as if he wrote them this week!

There are at least three striking things that we should see in Jeremiah’s admonition: the requirement, the reward and the refusal.

I. The Requirement

There was a requirement if these people wanted to return to God. Jeremiah said that they must walk in the old paths which their fathers had walked in. What does that suggest? How do we do that? Well, there are four steps in God’s prescription given here: they were to stand, see, ask and walk. If you think about it, that should be pretty familiar to all of us who learned to drive an automobile. You were likely taught by a parent or maybe a driver’s education instructor that when you come to a crossing, you don’t just proceed. That can be deadly. Instead, you do the very things that Jeremiah told the people to do spiritually: you stand, or stop. You don’t go any farther until you know that it’s safe to proceed. You stand, then you see. That is, you look in both directions. You make sure that the way is clear and there is no danger. Then, you ask. You listen, you seek the directions. You listen for the whistle of the train or the rumble of the tracks. You look and see which direction that road is headed, you inquire in other words. You listen for the warning or the all clear, then you proceed or walk. Jeremiah is telling us that when we come to the crossroads of life, we stop, look and listen before we go. Think about it this way: if a person sets out on a trip to a place that he’s never been, he would be very, very foolish if he set out without a map or GPS or if he refused to stop and ask for directions. If he just got behind the wheel and hit the gas and went with the wind, there’s no telling where he would end up. Anywhere except where he intended to go, most likely.

Questions that can affect our eternity are far too important to do any less. So, let's think about Jeremiah's wise admonition here. First, he says to '*stand ye in the ways.*' In other words, *don't go yet.* Stop and approach this question of life or salvation or of worship or Christian conduct very carefully, not haphazardly. Approach it intellectually, not emotionally. Deliberately, not carelessly.

Ephesians 5:15 "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise..."

The word "*circumspectly*" means *exactly, cautiously, carefully.* So many people just bound through life without giving a lot of thought to the consequences of their choices. That just about always gets them in trouble. There are people who approach spiritual matters that way. They've come to think that God is really indifferent to the kind of life they live, what they believe and how they worship, and they're treating these matters very, very lightly. But Paul tells us to "*walk circumspectly,*" don't just rush ahead. You stop and give the proper consideration to the choice that is before you.

Do you give any serious thought to what your preacher preaches, whether it really is the truth of God's Word? Do you do like the Bereans of Acts?

Acts 17:11 "...they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

I hope you do that with what we talk about here. Have you ever really stopped to carefully think about the practices of your local church, whether or not its assemblies are scriptural and regulated by divine unction? Or do you just, like so many, dismiss the thought and say, "Well, it's exciting and emotionally gratifying or it feels right and I can't see anything wrong with it..."? You see, churches today have bought into consumerism and pragmatism and most people give very little if any thought as to whether their practices and beliefs are actually what the Word of God teaches. We are aimlessly adrift today on a sea of subjectivism and relativism. "*Stand ye in the ways,*" he said. Stop and consider your faith, your worship, your life in view of God's absolute and unchanging word.

Then, he says that we need to see or look. We need to assess the course that we're on. Where we've been and where we're going, to look at the paths in front of us to see where they'll take us.

Then, we are to ask for the old paths. As I said a moment ago, that means to inquire. In other words, we don't stand at the crossroads and choose our course based upon our own thinking. He says we should ask or inquire as to what paths our fathers of old walked. As it applies to us, we're not talking about our literal fathers necessarily. Your fleshly father can certainly lead you wrong although he is worthy of respect because he IS your father, but he's not infallible. He may be wrong himself. I'm not talking about following a tradition simply because someone came along and made it a tradition. I'm talking about our forefathers in the faith; those who brought the revelation of Christ to earth. What I'm talking about is asking for a thus saith the Lord. The word 'tradition' is a word that a lot of people shun today. In fact, many will do the very opposite of a thing because they perceive that the thing is a tradition or traditional, thinking that tradition is bad. Well, some traditions ARE bad. Some traditions were ill-conceived and they don't come from the Word of God and they need to be abandoned. But the word

'tradition' itself is a scriptural word, and the Bible tells us that there ARE traditions that are to be honored and kept.

II Thessalonians 2:15 "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."

What did Paul mean by that? Was he talking about just any tradition? No, he qualifies it by saying "*the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.*" He means for them to keep the things that we--by inspiration of the Holy Spirit-- have taught you, by our preaching or by the letters that we wrote to you, which we now have in the form of God's Holy Word.

The Lord and the apostle Paul both spoke negatively about the traditions of men, but Paul spoke very positively about the traditions passed down from he and the other apostles.

II Thessalonians 3:6 "...that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us."

I Corinthians 11:1-2 "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you."

That word "*ordinances*" is from the Greek word "*paradosis*" that is just as well translated *traditions*. It means *transmission; for example, a precept*, according to Mr. Strong (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible). A.T. Robertson says that this verse is saying, "Hold fast the traditions and the word (*paradosis*)." He says that that merely means *something handed on from one to another*. That in itself implies something that is *old*. My friend, the truth is not new. It is as old as God's Word and it does not change. You might have a thought that is new to you about the truth. The truth itself might become new to you simply because you've never seen it before. But if it's true, it's not new. It's as old as the Bible.

John 17:17 "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

Psalms 119:89 "For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven."

The truth was settled a long, long time ago, and the question today is whether we will seek it out and obey it. If only preachers, Christians and churches would stop asking the pragmatic questions: Does it work? Does it draw a crowd? Does it interest the young people? Will the world find it agreeable? Does it suit me? And rather, start asking: What does the Word of God teach? You see, that will be the question if we're heeding Jeremiah's plea. Dear friend, there may be many things in your life and your beliefs and your worship that you've just taken for granted and maybe I've taken for granted. I want to challenge us ALL to do what Jeremiah says and stop, look and ask for the old paths.

Why did Jeremiah plead with them to do that? We've seen the requirement of asking for the old paths. But, what is the reward of doing that?

II. The Reward

Jeremiah 6:16 “Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.”

Isaiah 57:20 “But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.”

You see, there is no peace and rest for the person who is not standing on the foundation of scripture. That’s interesting, because that’s really what faith is all about. Remember the definition of faith in that classic verse by the writer of Hebrews?

Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

The Greek word there for “*substance*” means *that which is placed under, a ground, a basis, a foundation, a support*. In other passages, that Greek word is rendered *confident* or *confidence* (**II Corinthians 9:4, I Corinthians 11:17, Hebrews 3:14**). Then, we learn where this faith comes from:

Romans 10:17 “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

So, we can be *confident* because of what the Word of God says. I know that there is a God, I know that there is eternal existence, I know that God has a will for us. I know all of these things through *faith*. I’ve not seen God through a microscope or a telescope or any means of scientific study, and you can’t prove that God exists through science, but “*the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen*” (**Romans 1:20**), and I come to understand how these things came to be, and I come to know this great creator—not through scientific means, but through faith. The Bible claims that it is a relationship based upon faith, and I have faith because the inspired Word of God declares those things to be so, and I stand upon and rest in those confidences.

You know, if you take the Word of God out of the equation, what do you have? How do you establish ultimate reality? How do you determine the purpose of life? How do you determine the will of God? If you believe in God, how do you know His will? How do you decide moral issues? See, everything outside of God’s Word, when it comes to those things, becomes subjective and changing and fluid and confusing. But God’s Word is absolute. Jeremiah told those people of old to return to the paths of faith and fidelity, to the law of God and they would find rest for their souls. There is rock solid assurance in any belief or practice that you can read in God’s Word.

Now, I sometimes fail in my efforts to live like I should, and you do too. And my conscience stings when I know that I’m not acting in the will of God. There are things about God’s Word that even I have yet to come to understand, and those things perplex and bother me, as I’m sure many things about God’s Word perplex and bother you. But I am sure about what I know I can read in the scripture!

When the congregations of the churches of Christ assemble and worship together, many say that our practice is simple and archaic, but you know what? I can read it in the Word of God. I want to challenge you to investigate that. I can read where the early church sang and made melody in their hearts to the

Lord (**Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19**). But I can't read where any New Testament church used an instrument of music.

I can read where the early disciples came together as taught by Christ, to commune with a loaf of unleavened bread and a cup of fruit of the vine. I can't read one word in the Bible about the disciples communing with individual cups. I can read where the disciples came together and broke bread on the first day of the week (**Acts 20:7**), and I know that by following that example, I'm doing something in accordance with divine authority.

I can read where the church came together in one place to be taught the word of God by one man speaking at a time to all of the assembly (**I Corinthians 14**). I can read nothing of the church dividing up into segregated classes or the Sunday school arrangement teaching.

I can read these things in God's Word and I believe that they are examples worth following and I have a peace about those matters, because there's not a doubt that in doing what they did, I can be right where those things are concerned. You can't say that about innovations.

III. The Refusal

Jeremiah 6:16-17 "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein."

Those are some sad words. They indicate a stubborn and intransigent refusal to submit to God. Why were these people in rebellion to God and marked for judgment: because they refused to walk in the paths of old. Friend, Christianity is an ancient thing. It was patterned for us 2,000 years ago when Christ established it and when the Spirit revealed it. In this day of ever constant religious change, evolution and apostasy, have you ever stopped to think, where does it end? Where is it taking us? There is a rest for your soul, if you'll do as Jeremiah pled.