

The Ancient Path to True Worship

Text: Jeremiah 6:16; Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 6:1-26; Matthew 7:13-14

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About ten years ago, we went on a hike to a big, raging waterfall in the island of Camiguin. Early into the hike, we came to a crossroad, and after some discussion, we decided to take the path on the right. After an arduous two-hour jungle trek, we finally came to the scenic waterfall where we all refreshed ourselves in the cool lake below it. On our way back, someone told us to take a different trail. In about fifteen minutes, we arrived at the same crossroad early in our hike!

In the history of Israel beginning with their exodus from Egypt, the people faced many crossroads and repeatedly chose the wrong road as we all did in our waterfall hike. Early in their exodus, they chose to worship the golden calf instead of Yahweh. During the time of the judges, they chose to worship Baal instead of the God of their fathers. Most of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel chose to worship idols instead of the God of David. So God punished them by sending the Assyrians to destroy their kingdom. And in the southern kingdom of Judah, most of the kings also chose to worship idols instead of Yahweh.

In our text, Jeremiah tells the people of Judah that they were at another crossroads in their history: one path leads to destruction, the other leads to peace and rest. They have rejected the laws of Moses and continued in their evil ways, “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely” (**Jer 6:13**). Their prophets and priests gave them false hope, “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (**Jer 6:14**).

God condemned Israel not only for their wayward lives, but especially for their idolatry and false worship, “Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me” (**Jer 6:20**). The people taught that by merely making offerings and sacrifices, even when their hearts were not right, God would be pleased with them.

Jeremiah warned them that if they did not turn from their sins and idolatry, God would send the cruel Babylonians to destroy them,

*Behold, a people is coming from the north country, a great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. They lay hold on bow and javelin; they are cruel and have no mercy; the sound of them is like the roaring sea; they ride on horses, set in array as a man for battle, against you, O daughter of Zion! [O]ur hands fall helpless; anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor... [F]or the enemy has a sword; terror is on every side (**Jer 6:22-25**).*

The people of Judah faced another major crossroad in their history. Which road should they take? Jeremiah directed them to the good path of salvation – the ancient path of true worship. He warned them that the other path leads to destruction.

This afternoon, we will study the theme **The Ancient Path of True Worship**: First, **How to Find the Ancient Path**; second, **What to Do after Finding the Ancient Path**.

How to Find the Ancient Path

Whenever we travel, one of the biggest decisions we usually have to make is when we come to a crossroad. More than ten years ago, I was with a group of young people climbing Mt. Apo, the highest peak in the Philippines. At several points during the climb, we came to a crossroad on the trail, and we had to stop and look and think before continuing the climb. Two things we had to remember were: first, always take the trail that looks like the main, well-traveled one; and second, since we were climbing, always take the trail that goes uphill.

Jeremiah urges Israel to take the good way which will lead them to God's rest. How would they know which path to take? What signs would they look for? Jeremiah gives them two simple answers.

Stand By and Look

Before they continue on their travel, Jeremiah tells them to pause, "Stand by and look!" One path is full of all kinds of idols - idols of their neighbors. In **2 Kings 17**, we read of the northern kingdom of Israel falling to the Assyrians. And the Assyrians brought in all kinds of foreign people to settle in the land, "And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel" (**2 Kings 17:24**). And each of these people had their own idol-gods which they brought with them. Instead of rejecting them, the Israelites who remained in the land added the idol-gods to the God of their father Abraham. What resulted is a syncretism never before seen in the land, "So they feared the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away" (**2 Kings 17:33**).

And the idolatrous people of the northern kingdom influenced the people of the southern kingdom. Jeremiah condemned their idolatry. At the crossroad, he tells them, "Stop and look first at the road to destruction! The road is full of idols! These idols are stumbling blocks in this path, and you will stumble. At the end of this road, fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish" (**Jer 6:21**). But Judah did not pay attention.

Today, God's people have chosen the wrong path in worship. Everywhere, churches are on the path full of worldly idol-gods which they call contemporary worship. On this same path that the Jews chose in Jeremiah's day are Christians walking in all kinds of worship practices from the world. Pastors boast of gimmicks, talk shows, music, instruments, and all other sorts of worldly entertainment that they have presented to the people as the right path of worshipping God. These men of God are directing their people in this path full of stumbling blocks, a path which leads them to destruction.

Not only is this path full of worldly idol-gods; this is the path that most people travel. Many even say, "This is only one of the paths that leads to heaven. Whatever path you take - Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age - that path will lead you to heaven." In the days of the Roman Empire, the Roman emperors built roads from the far reaches of the empire which led to the center of the empire, the city of Rome, and they said, "All roads lead to Rome."

This is the path that most people are taking today, the path of false worship full of innovations derived from the unbelieving world, the same syncretistic path that Israel of old walked, the path that leads to destruction.

At the crossroad, Jeremiah warns Israel, "Before you take the path of false worship, stop and look and think!" Then, before they continue their travel, he tells the people to ask, "Where is the ancient path, where the way of the good is?"

Ask for the Way of the Good

With this question, Jeremiah points the people back to the ancient path that their forefathers walked. He was not saying that because something is old and traditional, it is right and better. He was not telling Israel to bring back "the good old days" because of sentimental or nostalgic feelings. During our high school's 40th anniversary reunion last year, I had those sentimental feelings just seeing my old friends, exchanging funny high school stories, and listening to our favorite Beatles and Rolling Stones music. No, Jeremiah was not being nostalgic when he summoned Israel to walk the ancient paths.

He was urging them to go back to the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to read, study and meditate on the law of Moses which they have neglected, but where true worship can be found. They were not to seek new revelations from God to tell them where the way of the good is, the ancient paths, because God's will could be found in two well-trodden ways:

First, they could read the law of Moses to tell them which path to take. It tells them, "You shall have no other gods before me." And then, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image... [to] bow down to them or worship them." Every time they read those words, they knew which path not to take - the path full of the stumbling blocks of idol-gods. In the Holy Scriptures, God clearly tells them what kind of worship was pleasing to him, first in the tabernacle and later, in the Temple. But they rejected God's law.

Second, they could find the way of the good by asking the prophets - men of God who tell them what God's will is. Jeremiah told them which path to take. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and all the other prophets told them where to find the way of the good. But they would not pay attention.

"Ask for the ancient paths, where the way of the good is." This instruction is for us too.

Our culture tells us to always look for the new and improved; the latest is always the greatest. We look at the cell phone stores and crave for the latest cell phone models. Pastors are always on the lookout for new methods, new gimmicks, and worst of all, new doctrines. Worship teams are always seeking new songs and music. But the way of true worship is to be found in two simple ways:

First, we are to seek for answers to our questions about worship in Scriptures. Is a song, prayer, or sermon biblical? Compare it with the Scriptures. Are certain kinds of music, shouting, dancing, clapping, and other disorderly practices appropriate? Apply principles from Scriptures.

As well, we are to inquire from the Bible what God commands us to do in our worship. What did God command Moses in their tabernacle worship? What did God command David and Solomon in their temple worship? What does Jesus and the apostles tell us about the true worship of God?

Second, we are to ask our forefathers in the faith. What did they do in their worship? The last person to consult about worship is a person who is not a worshiper of God – the unbelieving in the world. But this is what churches do today. They look around them, and then imitate what the world does to attract people to their popular concerts and seminars.

Instead of consulting the present evil generation, ask the early church fathers what they did in their worship. This is what the Protestant Reformers did. What did they find out? The Reformers found out several things that were very different from their medieval worship:

Early church worship was simple, and was divided into two parts – the service of the Word and the service of the Holy Communion. Their worship was Christ-centered – they preached Christ and his death and resurrection. Their worship was immersed in Scriptures; they read, studied, prayed, and sung the word of God. Their worship was joyful but reverent because God is a merciful but holy God. Their worship was out-of-this-worldly – they did not adopt Greek and Roman cultural and religious practices.

We are to ask how the Reformers applied what they found out about early church worship in the Reformation churches. In reforming the medieval church, what doctrines and practices did they keep, and what did they throw away as unbiblical? What liturgy or pattern of worship did they follow?

As we approach the crossroad in the worship and doctrine of the church, we are to stop and think, look and observe, and inquire where the ancient path of true worship is. And after finding the way of the good, what are we to do?

What to Do After Finding the Ancient Path

After finding the ancient path, Jeremiah says, Israel must “walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” He calls them to obedience to God’s covenant laws. He calls them to return to the ways of their forefathers Abraham, Moses, and David: the path of love of God and love for one another.

During the time of their forefathers, the Israelites knew the right path. But repeatedly, they rejected this knowledge and willfully took the wrong way. God punished them time and again to turn them back to the right path. Jeremiah says that God’s judgment is coming to them because they walked in the way full of idol-gods, “But my people have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods; they made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway” (**Jer 18:15**).

How did Israel forget the Lord God and his covenant? It was not only because they willfully rejected it. Since the children of Abraham, Moses and David rejected God’s covenant, they did not teach God’s laws to their children. God constantly reminded Israel how they should

remember his covenant for generations, “You shall them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (**Deu 6:7**). And again in **Psa 78:5-7**,

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

From generation to generation, Israel was to teach God’s laws to their children, but Israel did not heed Yahweh’s instruction. So they forgot the mighty works God did for them.

Is not this what is being done by God’s people today? They do not teach God’s word to their children. They do not teach their children to sing God’s word; there is no knowledge of the great hymns of the church, much less of Psalm-singing. They do not teach their children to memorize the ancient creeds of the church and familiar Bible texts such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, **Psalm 23** or the Beatitudes.

How then would we worship together as God’s universal church from all times and places in the heavenly Mount Zion, with the great “assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven... and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (**Heb 12:23**)? How are we to pray the Lord’s Prayer and recite the Apostles’ Creed that our forefathers prayed and recited together with their forefathers and their children when we do not know them? How are we to sing the great hymns and Psalms together with the generations before and after us when the songs we sing today are like flowers that flourish in the morning but are soon withered in the evening?

Is it any wonder then that the church today are like the Jews in Jeremiah’s day, who soon forgot the word of God and his mighty works? Is not the worship of today a meaningless routine of trite and mindless “praise and worship” ditties and equally mindless, Christ-less, Scripture-less sermons?

The Jews thought that by merely going through their ceremonies, God would always be pleased with them. But it’s not only knowledge of God and required sacrifices that counts; obedience is also most important. In the same way, Paul’s prayer for us is that we “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (**Col. 1:9-10**). As we walk in the right path of obedience to Christ, we please God, bear much fruit, and increase in the knowledge of God.

In the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we read, Jesus teaches us what to do at the crossroad. The narrow way, even how hard and unpopular it may be, leads to eternal life. But the wide road, the easy road, the popular road, leads to eternal destruction.

Just because a church has hundreds or thousands of attendees, various programs, popular music, and big, nice buildings, does not mean that it is pleasing to God. The Bible is full of warnings to God’s people that the popular way of the world is the way that leads to destruction, “The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (**Psa. 1:6**).

Do not be dismayed that there are only a few of us! Persevere in the ancient path of true worship, though it may be narrow and hard and unpopular. Be faithful in walking the ancient path of obedience and true worship. And Christ promises not only a harvest of other souls, but rest for your own souls.

Conclusion

Beloved friends in Christ, in your pilgrimage in this world, you will be challenged by many crossroads. Before choosing a path, stop and look. Ask for the ancient path of your good forefathers in the faith. Then walk in that path, however narrow, hard and less-traveled it may be.

Because if you continue walking in this ancient path, our text promises that you will find rest for your souls. True worship and faithful obedience give you peace and rest in God. Jesus himself encourages us with his own promise: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (**Mat 11:28-29**).

Strive to enter that rest promised by Christ, so you will not fall by the same disobedience that led to ancient Israel's destruction long time ago.

To God alone be all the glory! AMEN.