

Jeremiah 6:10-16 (1984 NIV)
Ask for the Ancient Paths

Introduction

The book of Jeremiah was written by a man divinely called in his youth. God gave Jeremiah a hard message for His disobedient people. Jeremiah proclaimed this message for more than 40 years to the people of Judah.

We often have the tendency to say a hard truth in a softened way in order to lessen its unpleasantness—we call this euphemism.

A man was sentenced in court and then sent to jail.

His cell mate asked: “Why are you here? What crime did you commit?”

The man answered: “For doing my Christmas shopping too early.”

Puzzled, the cell mate asked again: “But that’s no crime. How early did you do your shopping?”

The man replied: “Before the shop opened.”

We often have the tendency to say a hard truth in a softened way in order to lessen its unpleasantness.

But Jeremiah said those hard words from God as they were, BUT with tears of compassion for the people—he’s known as the “weeping prophet”.

Jeremiah declared through his words and signs that surrender to the will of God would be the only way to avoid the divine judgment of Babylonian subjugation.

For a period of time after they had claimed the Promised Land, the Israelites remained faithful to God. But over the course of time they began drifting farther and farther off the path of their forefathers. The Israelites in Jeremiah’s time now considered themselves to be much more enlightened than the Hebrews of Moses’ day. Thus God commanded the prophet Jeremiah to sound forth this message of judgment.

This prophecy to Judah was given just before their captivity in Babylon. It was a message to God’s people at a crossroad.

In a fast-changing world, we too have to face many crossroads in our lives. What does Jeremiah’s message have to teach us as we face our own crossroads in a fast-changing world?

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I. In a fast-changing world, we will be tempted to hear more from the world and less from God (vv. 10, 13-15).

Verse 10 - "To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the Lord is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it."

I picture here the Lord longing and even pleading for a listening audience with His own people. He's like a loving father who would only want and advise the best things for his children. Yet, they had chosen not to listen.

Sometimes we never give God a chance to talk to us. We've made up our minds. We want to do what we want to do, not what God wants us to do. Our ears are closed to His voice, and we're unwilling to listen.

But if you really want to hear from God, you have to understand what is keeping you from hearing Him.

Verses 13-15 read: "From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush ..."

In the same way like God's people in the time of Jeremiah, human greed, deceit, lack of compassion, false peace, and hardened insensitivity can make us deaf to God.

There's this saying: "To sin is human." But I believe that the will of God for His people is this—sinning may be a fact of life, but in Jesus Christ it must not be a pattern in life.

Once we give up the moral high ground, we can live like the people in Jeremiah's time—"they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush."

The story is told of a floating dormitory for oil workers in the North Sea that sank underwater during the night killing over 100 people. The engineering experts quickly constructed different theories and complex explanations that focused on operational errors and management decisions.

All of these theories were wrong. It was eventually discovered through careful analysis that many weeks earlier a crack in a support structure had been painted over, instead of being reported and repaired. This seemingly harmless mistake caused the superstructure to fail, sinking

the dormitory. Without careful analysis the wrong conclusion would have been reached, and the wrong lesson would have been learned.

(<http://lifehacker.com/5863490/how-to-learn-from-your-mistakes>)

In the same way, an important reason why sin becomes a pattern in life is because we “paint it over” rather than “own up to it”. We try all kinds of solutions but the problem continues ... because the root problem is not acknowledged and dealt with. Instead of hearing God, we seek to hear from other sources.

Generally, there are some ways for us to hear God again and return to His ways:

- Accept responsibility.
- You can't undo your wrongdoings, but you can choose how to respond to them.
- Growth starts when you see that you can be a better person in Jesus Christ.
- Work on the changes required.

Specifically, Jeremiah's message teaches us that ...

II. In a fast-changing world, we hear God when we obey the ancient paths (v. 16).

Verse 16 - This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”

1. What are the “ancient paths”?

i. *The ancient paths are the tried and true ways of Judah's godly ancestors (Jer. 18:15).* They obeyed the ethical and moral principles of the covenant, and that brought spiritual as well as material blessings to the nation and to individuals. The ancient paths represent the ways laid down in God's Law. These are good ways because when a person walks in them he would find rest for his soul.

Jeremiah admonished the people to remember the old traditions of faith and obedience. By returning to those ancient paths and walking in them they could find rest.

But we must not confuse traditions with traditionalism.

Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan defines tradition as the “living faith of the dead”. Tradition, therefore, is not something that is merely relegated to the past. Since it is “living faith”, it also informs and shapes the present. It

provides us with valuable perspectives for the future. E.g. in our national education curriculum, we learn the beliefs, values, and practices of our pioneering founders so that we can continue in our nation building both for now and the future.

But we need to be mindful to embrace tradition, not traditionalism. This mistake sometimes happens because traditionalism is sometimes masked by the concept of tradition.

Pelikan says it well: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” And it is really traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.

Traditionalism is valuing traditions as unwritten laws which are over and above the Word of God. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who held to many traditions which conflicted with God’s direct commands. For example, He condemned the practice called “Corban” in which a person could dedicate his goods to the temple (i.e. for God’s use), but then deny help to his own parents for that very reason, saying that his goods and finances were “Corban” and thus unavailable. This, of course, was contrary to the commandment to honour one’s parents (Mark 7:8-13).

One real danger of traditionalism is that it can breed a false sense of spirituality. When certain traditions become so familiar that the reason behind them is forgotten, then outward actions can be mistaken as inner spirituality. Hymns can be sung without heart and rituals become routine. The outward doing does not reflect the inner motive or desire. A person can be far from God, but thinks he’s OK because he conforms to some traditions.

How to have a healthy regard for traditions:

- Where the Bible is silent, exercise the freedom to keep good traditions and respect that of others. This is a good opportunity to show grace and acceptance to others who have different practices and backgrounds.
- Make sure your traditions are relevant. Traditions are good if they help people understand God’s truth and grow in it. However, God is a God of creation and creativity—so don’t box Him up; be open to a new way of doing things if it is God’s way of doing His things.
- Beware of the world’s philosophy that tempts us to believe that anything new/different from the old must be better.

ii. *The ancient paths are God’s principles revealed in His ways and eternal Word (Psalm 119:105; Isa. 30:21).* The word “ancient” doesn’t mean “old-fashioned” or “outdated”. Rather, it carries the meaning of “being timeless, time-proven, unchanging and eternal”. The principles in God’s ways and in

His Word are the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. These are unchanging. What needs to be changed are the ways we apply these same principles in our lives today. Put in another way, we let God's ways and Word change us, and not the other way round.

A college professor in psychology once did an experiment on his students to determine how they would think.

He asked them to punctuate this sentence on a piece of paper:
Woman without her man is nothing

After he had gone through all the answers, he discovered something very interesting.

All the male students had punctuated the sentence this way:
Woman, without her man, is nothing.

All the female students had punctuated the sentence this way:
Woman, without her, man is nothing.

The point is this: There is this tendency in the human nature to want to be smarter than the other person, the other gender. The Bible tells us that man and woman fell into sin because they wanted to be "like God"—i.e. at least as smart as God. But no man or woman can be like God or can outsmart God. God's ways and thoughts are always higher than ours. When we think we are progressive enough to change the ways and Word of God—i.e. the ancient paths of God—we end up not worshipping Him, but ourselves, and we cannot hear Him anymore.

2. How do we walk the ancient paths?

i. *"Stand at the crossroads and look ..."* (v. 16a). We need to learn to stop and look; to still ourselves in the midst of all the busyness. Otherwise, we don't grow as Christian disciples. Instead, we only become Christian busy bees. To work in obedience of Christ, we need first to walk in intimacy with Him. Only then will our service be an outflow of our intimacy with Him. It is interesting that in John 21, the Lord first asked Peter about his love for Him ("do you love me more than these?") before he asked Peter to work for Him ("feed my sheep"). For three times the Lord asked in such a manner. I believe what the Lord has wanted to remind Peter (and us) is to first walk intimately with Him before we work busily for Him. And if our service is not an outflow of love for the Lord, we will soon run on an empty tank of love. We then begin to serve with less and less joy, but with more and more frustration.

The Lord may be calling us to work out a "stop-do" list, NOT a "to-do" list. As we stand at the crossroads as a person and as a church, what are

some “good things” the Lord is calling us to put aside so that we will not neglect that “one thing” He wants us to keep as the main thing; to stop doing because we are just working restlessly in step with the world, but not walking restfully in step with the Lord?

The ancient paths help us find rest in our souls. Are we seeking and walking on them in our lives today?

ii. *“Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is ...” (v. 16b).* Today we live in a world of instant information—we get what we want to know in a flash by just using Google. So the way of life today is often knowledge accumulation. We pride ourselves on being knowledgeable and well-informed. And when you have that mindset; when you think you always know better, the tendency is to be self-sufficient, and you don’t ask. You don’t ask even from and of God.

Today, people mistakenly think that knowledge is wisdom. So, people are often seeking for knowledge accumulation, but the Lord is looking for life transformation. You don’t have to study in a Bible college to gain knowledge of biblical truths. Lots of materials are on the internet. But biblical truths alone don’t change lives. Only biblical truths applied as directed and enabled by the Holy Spirit do change lives. Discipleship is the application of truth in the walk of lives.

So, we need to go back to the ancient paths of asking God not only to seek His way and will, but also to discern and obey these in our lives. Let the Holy Spirit of God be the divine Teacher and Discipler of our faith knowledge and faith life.

iii. *“Walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls ...” (v. 16c).* The ancient paths are not only for deep discussion, deep thinking, and deep reflection. More importantly, they are for decisive action. We are to conduct and direct our lives according to our decision to walk the ancient paths.

The Lord does not ask His people to merely talk about the Great Commission or the Great Commandment. He wants us to go and do likewise just as He has done it before us and for us.

In Jeremiah’s time, the people of God responded to his message with wilful defiance. In the last part of v. 16, they answered, “We will not walk in it.” That’s how far they had departed from the Lord. And that can happen to us too.

How does Jeremiah’s message teach us to approach life?

III. In a fast-changing world, the ancient paths lead us to an overflowing life because God’s hand is not turned against us (vv. 11-12).

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Verses 11-12 read: “Pour it out on the children in the street and on the young men gathered together; both husband and wife will be caught in it, and the old, those weighed down with years. Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives, when I stretch out my hand against those who live in the land,” declares the Lord.

When the people of God first entered the Promised Land, they were blessed in a “land that’s flowing with milk and honey”. When they turned more and more away from God as in Jeremiah’s time; when they refused to walk on the ancient paths, we are told in v. 12 that the Lord stretched out His hand against them. He would use the invading Babylonians to take away everything dear to them—“their houses (their security) ... their fields (their wealth) ... their wives (their closest relationship).” Their overflowing life became an overturning life.

The reasons why the Lord’s hand was turned against them are found in vv. 13-15—because of their greed, deceit, lack of compassion for others, false peace, and hardened insensitivity. They stopped worshipping the Provider, and instead they worshipped His provisions. Such an approach to life is contradictory to the overflowing life that the Lord wants to bless His people with in their trust and obedience to Him.

The overflowing-life approach carries the mindset that God has more than we will ever need. It focuses on God’s limitless resources. It results in an overflowing life characterized by:

- Joy
- Contentment
- Sharing
- Giving
- Generosity
- Other-centred

Jesus said: “I’ve come that you may have real life, and enjoy it in abundance—to the fullest, until it overflows!” (John 10:10, Amplified Bible)

The Lord’s blessings overflow to me, but don’t stop with me and I don’t take them all. As the Lord’s blessings overflow to me, I in turn become a channel through which His blessings overflow to others. This is the overflowing life in the Lord’s sufficiency that the ancient paths point to.

How then can we experience an overflowing life? Let me suggest four basic yet always necessary things.

- *Stay connected with the Lord (John 15:7-11)*. Stay connected with the Lord by spending time in His Word every day; know and do His Word.
- *Stop complaining and start thanking (Col. 2:7)*. Before you go to sleep each night, thank the Lord for each thing you are grateful for.

- *Stop comparing and start being contented (Ecc. 4:6).* New Century Version: “It is better to be content with what you have than to always be struggling for more. That is like chasing the wind.”
- *Stop keeping for yourself and start sharing with others (Luke 6:38).* If you have not yet started giving to the church and to others, the Lord is calling you to start doing so beginning today. Start to be a contributor rather than a consumer; to be a giver rather than a taker. When the Lord blesses you materially, He enables you to raise the standard of your living, and also expects you to raise the standard of your giving.

Conclusion

The call to walk the ancient paths is a call to return to exercise faith and faithfulness in the basics of the spiritual life. These are the basics that we all know at some level. Yet these are so easily neglected and forgotten after some time.

But that’s not how it works. In fact, the higher we go up in leadership or spirituality, the more we need the basics to help us guard our relationships with God and others.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, who do you go to for help when you are standing at the crossroads of life or facing a crisis? Where do you find rest for your soul at such times?

Jesus in Matt. 11:28 - “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus invites the weary and burdened to come to Him. And the greatest burden we carry in this life is not the cares of this world, but the burden of sin. Sin separates us from the peace that God has intended for us. Sin tears down our relationships with other people. Sin weighs us down because of the anger, fear, pain, anxiety, and unforgiveness embedded deep inside our inner soul.

You can find rest in your soul from all these when you come to Jesus.

The greed, deceit, lack of compassion, false peace, and hardened insensitivity are expressions of the sin of the people in Jeremiah’s time. These led them to depart far, far away from God. And the message of Jeremiah came true—God judged the people and threw them into the hands of their enemies.

Today, you can find rescue from this and rest in your soul when you come to Jesus. If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, are you feeling weary and burdened today? We encourage you to talk with us to find out what it really means to come to Jesus and find rest in Him.

For those who are believers in Jesus Christ, do not neglect the basic pillars of discipleship—Worship, Word, Witness (Outreach), Fellowship, and Prayer—so that when you are standing at the crossroads of life or facing a crisis in life, you will hear God and obey Him with conviction.

Continue to walk on the ancient paths of spiritual basics because when the basics are in place, the crisis can be faced. Amen!