



ASK FOR THE OLD PATHS

Kevin Presley

People like things that seem new and novel, and we tend to cast aside those things that are old and common. Increasingly, our culture doesn't show much respect for anyone or much of anything that we consider old. The bible says in Leviticus 19:32 "You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an 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 We dismiss what they say as outdated and irrelevant.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 is old is new – that is – when somebody touts something as new, you'll usually find they are merely recycling something that has been seen or heard before. There really is no such thing as a NEW false doctrine. It's all been said or tried in one form or another at some point in the past. And that which is old is often discarded and so long forgotten that when we see it, it seems new and novel to us. The ancient truth of God is that way. There is no such thing as a NEW truth because God's word is truth according to John 17:17.

Well, a long time ago, the prophet Jeremiah urged the people of God to return to the past... to go back to their roots and rediscover God's truth. In Jeremiah 6:16 we read: "Thus says the LORD: "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it..'"

The very words of Jeremiah, “ask for the old paths, where the good way is”, are enough in themselves to evoke a sigh and cause modern eyes to roll because we live in a day when few people value that which is old. We think of things that are old as ‘out of date’ and ‘irrelevant’. Surely new is better. Surely as time goes on, we improve on things and progress – not regress. But that’s not necessarily the way 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 judgement. God was ready to punish them -- because of their moral corruption, their sexual sin, their unbelief, and their religious 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. Jeremiah knew that God’s hand was stretched out against Jerusalem and the city was about to be turned over to 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: -- Continue in sin and on to destruction -- OR -- turn back to the old paths where their fathers had walked and where Jeremiah says they could find rest for their souls.

Jeremiah calls the old paths – the good way. He is talking about the paths of respect and obedience for the law of God. There were times when the people were faithful to God and 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 appeared good but was unfamiliar – and they had shunned the paths of old. They would pay a 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 he 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 many years? As he looked and saw churches now even embracing sin and immorality and calling evil things good, 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 plea for God’s people to return. Could it be, if he were here today speaking in this age of godlessness, scriptural apostasy, and moral rot – speaking to this confused, postmodern generation -- that he would shed tears anew and plead “Stand ye in the way, and see, and ask for the old paths wherein is the good way, 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. Note the REQUIREMENT if these people wanted to return to God. Jeremiah says they must walk in the OLD PATHS that their fathers walked within. But what does that suggest? How do we do that? There are four steps in God’s prescription here. He said they were to STAND; they were to SEE; they were to ASK; and they were to WALK. Well, that should be familiar to all of us who learned to drive an automobile. You were likely taught by a parent or by the driver’s ed instructor that when you come to a crossing, you don’t just proceed. That could have deadly consequences. Instead, you do the

very things Jeremiah told the people to do. You STAND, that is, you don't go, you stop - you stand. You don't go any farther until you know that it's safe to proceed. You stand, and then you SEE. That is, you look. You look in both directions and see that the way is clear and there is no danger. And then you ASK. That means you not only look but you also listen. You listen for the whistle of the train or the rumble of the tracks. In other words, you inquire. You listen for the warning or the all-clear And THEN you proceed. So, Jeremiah is basically telling us that when we come to the crossroads of life – we stop, look and listen, before we go. Or think about it this way: if a person sets out on a trip to a place he's never been to, he would be very foolish if we set out without directions or a GPS or if we refuse to stop and ask for directions. If we just hit the gas and go with the wind – there's no telling where we will end up; anywhere EXCEPT where we needed to go. Questions that can affect our eternity are far too important to do any less.

Let's think about Jeremiah's wise admonition. First, he says; "STAND IN THE WAYS" – In other words, don't go yet but rather you stop. You approach this question of life, or of salvation, or of worship, or of Christian conduct carefully, not haphazardly. You approach it intellectually, not emotionally. You approach it deliberately, not carelessly. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:15 "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise," The word circumspectly means 'exact' or to be very cautious or careful. So many people just bound through life without giving a lot of thought to the consequences of their choices and that just about always gets them in trouble. And there are people who approach spiritual matters that way. They have come to think that God is rather indifferent to the kind of life they live, what they believe, how they worship, and they treat these matters very lightly. Paul says, walk circumspectly. Don't just rush ahead. You stop and give the proper consideration to the choice before you. Do you give any serious thought to what your preacher preaches and whether it really is the truth of God's word? Do you do like the Bereans of Acts and go home and search the scriptures to see if what you heard really is so? (Acts 17:11) Have you ever stopped, and I mean really stopped to think about the practice of your local church and whether its assemblies are scriptural and regulated by divine authority? Or do you dismiss the thought and say, "but it's exciting – or it's emotionally gratifying – or it feels right – or it sounds good"? You see churches today have bought into consumerism and pragmatism and most people give very little to any thought as to whether modern practices and beliefs are actually in accordance with the word of God. We are aimlessly adrift on a sea of subjectivism and relativism. "STAND IN THE WAYS." Stop to consider your faith, your worship, your life in view of God's absolute and unchanging word.

He not only says stand; he then says we need to SEE or look. We need to assess the course we are on. We need to see where we've been and where we're going and to look at the paths in front of us in view of where they'll take us. And then he says that we are to ASK for the OLD PATHS. This 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 for the old paths. We need to INQUIRE as to what paths our fathers of old walked. Now, as it applies to us, we're not talking about our literal fathers necessarily – 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, the apostles of Christ. I'm talking about

asking for a “thus sayeth the Lord.” Tradition is a word that a lot of people shun today. In fact, they’ll do the very opposite of a thing because they perceive that thing as traditional, thinking that tradition is bad. Well, some traditions are bad. Some traditions were ill-conceived and don’t come from the word of God and they need to be abandoned. But the word tradition is a scriptural word, and the Bible tells us there are traditions that are to be honored and kept. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 says; “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” What did Paul mean by holding the traditions ye have been taught? Was he talking about just any tradition? No. He qualifies it by saying hold the tradition that ye have been taught by word or our epistle. He means keep the things that we by inspiration of the Holy Spirit taught you whether by the apostles’ preaching or by the letters we wrote to you. Now the Lord and the Apostle Paul both talked negatively about the traditions of men, but Paul spoke positively about the tradition passed down from he and the other apostles. In the next chapter in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, he warned them about the brother who walked disorderly and “not according to the tradition which he received of us.” In 1 Corinthians 11:1-2 he wrote: “Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.” The word ordinances is from the Greek word ‘paradosis’ that is just as well translated “traditions”. It means something handed on from one to another. Well, 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 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. Jesus said in John 17:17, “your word is truth”. Psalm 119:89; “Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven.” The truth was settled a long, long time ago and the question today is whether we’ll seek it and obey it. Oh, if only preachers, Christians, churches would stop asking “does it work?” or “does it draw a crowd?” or “does it interest the young people?” or “will people find it agreeable?” or “does it suit me?” and start asking “what does the Bible teach?”. You see if we’re heeding Jeremiah’s plea, that will be the question. And my dear friend, there may be many things in your life, in your belief, in your worship, that you’ve just taken for granted and I have taken for granted. I want to challenge you 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 – but look at the REWARD. “Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; THEN YOU WILL 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.” There is no peace and rest for the person who is not standing on the foundation of scripture. In fact, that’s what faith is all about. What did the writer of Hebrews tell us in giving us the definition of faith? “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) The Greek word for substance there means “that which is placed under” – a “ground, basis, foundation or support”. In other passages like 2 Cor. 9:4; 2 Cor. 11:17; and Heb 3:14, it’s rendered “confident” and “confidence”. Then we learn in Romans 10:17 that faith comes by hearing the word of God. So, we can be confident because of what the word of God says. I know there’s a God, I know there’s eternal existence, I know that God has a will for us, I know all these things through faith because the inspired word of God declares them to be so. And I rest in that confidence. Now, 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? How do you decide moral issues? Everything outside of God's word when it comes to those things is subjective and changing. But God's word is absolute. Jeremiah tells the 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 effort to live like I know I should, and you do to. And my conscience stings when I know that I'm not acting in the will of God. And there are things about God's word that I have yet to come to understand. But I am confident and sure about what I know I can read in the scripture. When the churches of Christ assemble and worship together, many say our practice is simple and archaic. But you know what? I can read it in the word of God. I can read where the early church sang and made melody in their hearts to the Lord (Col 3:16, Eph 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 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. I know that by following that example that 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 the assembly. You can't read where the church came together and then divided itself into groups for teaching. I can read these things in God's word. And I believe they are examples worth following. And I have a peace about those matters because there is not a doubt that in doing what they did – that I am right where those things are concerned. You can't say that for innovations.

And finally, look at the people's REFUSAL. "Thus says the LORD: "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'" 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 Holy Spirit revealed it. And in this day of ever-constant religious change, evolution, and apostasy – do you ever wonder – where does it stop? There is rest for you soul if you will do as Jeremiah plead "Stand in the way, see, and ask for the old paths where is the good way."

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