

The Ancient Paths

Jeremiah 6:10-20

Gordon Randall – Sunday, 1st January 2012

INTRODUCTION

My wife has an interesting and slightly strange hobby called 'geocaching'. It involves walking in the countryside searching for hidden boxes of treasure (usually little trinkets) that other geocachers have carefully concealed in the undergrowth. Over the years she's found over 1,000 of them and is now something of an expert. As she gets close to the treasure's location she almost instinctively spots the well-worn path that other geocachers have walked and quickly discovers the cache. On those rare instances when she takes the wrong path it can take miles longer and very occasionally she returns empty handed. Choosing the right path can be the difference between finding the treasure or coming away with nothing. So in geocaching choosing the wrong path can be frustrating but it's not life changing.

However, other choices in life can have a huge impact. Nearly 31 years ago I travelled into Reading with a friend for a drink. Approaching Reading we came to a cross road - we had a choice turn left and have a quite drink in the town centre or turn right and go to the Reading college disco. I said "let's turn right" - and at the Reading College disco I met someone called Ruth Fulton (now Ruth Randall) – and the rest is history (life changing consequences!).

Looking at our passage this morning there is much to say but above all else hold on to verse 16: 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.

Moving into a New Year can feel like standing at a cross roads. Hopefully as we delve into our reading today we'll be encouraged to hold to the path laid down by God, an ancient good path where we find rest for our souls.

Throughout this passage and most of Jeremiah we hear God's prophet warning the people of God and trying desperately to turn them back to God. Therefore as we seek to walk God's path I hope this passage will help strengthen us as we move into a New Year by reminding us – firstly of the consequences of ...

1. Walking down the **wrong path**

2. Secondly by encouraging us to choose to walk down **the right path and its joys**

Let's begin by looking at our first point

1. **'Walking down the wrong path' and its consequences...**

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

The people of Jeremiah's day had fallen away from God and were simply going through the motions. In Jeremiah 7:23 (a little further on from our passage this morning) the people are reminded of the covenantal promise of God: I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you.

However, unfortunately God's people were simply acting out meaningless religious ritual and were unprepared to obey God in all areas of life. And they were angry and irritated by Jeremiah bleating on

about the consequences of their actions and all the subsequent doom and gloom he claimed was coming their way. They closed their ears and lacked any insight to comprehend God's divine word and even ridiculed it. They wanted no part of God's commands because living for God did not appear particularly exciting.

It's picture that reveals a frightening comparison with our world today. As in Jeremiah's day, people today at best dislike and in many instances reject God's call for a disciplined, selfless way of Godly living. In my own selfishness as a fallen human being I find consistently walking God's ancient path a challenge, and particularly against the backdrop of a world that promotes pleasure, a 'me first' culture and a wealth of modern day idols (money, wealth, possessions to name a few). I suspect we all struggle to keep to the path. But although it's challenging it also is crucially important. To highlight this turn to verses 11-12 and hear Jeremiah describe the consequences to the people of his day who were turning their back on God.

But I am full of the wrath of the LORD, and I cannot hold it in. 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.

Because all of God's people have been corrupted by wickedness, the wrath of God is to be poured out upon all of them. How would this be poured out – well later in verses 22-23 we discover that God would send the cruel Babylonians to destroy all but a remnant of the people of Judah.

Look, an army is coming from the land of the north; a great nation is being stirred up from the ends of the earth. They are armed with bow and spear; they are cruel and show no mercy. They sound like the roaring sea as they ride on their horses; they come like men in battle formation to attack you, O Daughter of Zion.

In those days war was total in nature with complete destruction of everything without respect to property, age or sex. And yet the people chose to ignore Jeremiah's plea.

Look at verse 13: From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practise deceit.

This passage reveals a picture where all of God's people are messing up including the religious leaders who are clearly just as corrupt as the rest of the population. So with all this in mind we perhaps shouldn't be surprised by verse 14: They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.

Even the priests were saying – don't worry everything will be okay, this Jeremiah chap is just a weirdo. "Ignore him and maybe he'll go way!" – the people preferred to listen to the false prophets and priests offering predictions of peace rather than Jeremiah's disapproval of their sins and predictions of disaster.

But denying the truth never changes it; what God says always happens. Sin can never be removed by denying its existence and simply continuing on the path of our own choosing – the one that looks comfortable and easy and in line with the rest of the world never works out in the long run.

In the history of Israel beginning with their exodus from Egypt, the people faced many crossroads and repeatedly chose the wrong path. Early in their exodus, they chose to worship the golden calf instead of God. During the time of the judges, they chose to worship Baal instead of God. Most of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel chose to worship idols instead of God. 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 God.

In our reading 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. Sadly as verse 16 reveals they once again responded with.... 'We will not walk in it'.

The right path for living is ancient and has been marked out by God. But God's people refused to take it, going their own way instead. So now look at verses 18 and 19: Therefore hear, O nations; observe, O witnesses, what will happen to them. Hear, O earth: I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law.

The rest of the world – in other words the Gentiles will see the humiliation of God's chosen people. Jeremiah is saying the other nations will be witnesses hearing the sentence of destruction passed because Judah has ignored God's words and rejected the covenant laws by which they were bound to Him.

The good ways mentioned in verse 16 are represented by Israel's history, prophecy and the law – but the people of Judah from Jeremiah's day preferred to ignore them preferring instead the pleasures of sin and despite all the warnings the people refused to flee from the wrath to come. Consequently catastrophe followed because they had chosen to fall away from God and their covenant with him. So lets now look at our second point...

2. 'Walking down the right path' – and its joys

As we look forward to 2012 what are our options – do we stop, take stock, pray and think through what is the best route for me going forward? To help us let me offer you a story.

Over seven years ago Ruth and I celebrated 20 years of marriage. To celebrate we decided (as a family) to walk up Snowden. We all anticipated a fairly relaxed walk up a hill or perhaps we'd even go up on the Snowden train. Well here's what we actually did...! Our sense of adventure got the better of us and led us to climb something called the "Razor's Edge". We spent a total of 11 hours on the mountainside. Interesting way to celebrate your 20th Wedding anniversary!

Now to be fair it turned out to be an amazing adventure and although frightening it was nevertheless an astonishing experience that all four of us (seven years on) still talk about. So...Ruth – once again you were right.

So why mention this story? When we did that climb we had to choose between two different paths. At a certain point on the mountainside we could go one of two different directions. One, called the pig track, looked easy, straight forward, even comfortable. The other involved challenge, risk and frankly looked (and was) scary. Going up via the Razor's edge took nine hours – on the way back we decided instead to follow the pig track – it took just two hours.

Throughout life we often face different paths and deciding which way to go can have a huge impact on what then happens in the future.

The ancient path is the Godly path – it takes us along the way God has prescribed for us to walk as found in God's Word in Scripture. The ancient paths are, simply put, "God's will for us." Paths walked by our spiritual fathers. They are the paths the Reformers, Calvin, Luther and others walked at the time of the Reformation. They are the ways the ancient church fathers, Augustine, Cyprian and others walked. They are the paths the apostles and Christ walked and set down for us in Scripture. These paths are old, and because they've had so much traffic on them, they are clearly defined and set down. They are the ultimate walking trail – true spiritual paths set down by God himself in Scripture.

So today as we go into a New Year ask yourself – am I going God's old true way, or rejecting it and following a new path of my own choosing? As New Testament Christians we live in the new covenant era given to us through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Romans 5:8 we read: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

These are amazing words. God sent Jesus Christ to die for us, not because we were good enough, but because he loved us. Through God's amazing love, grace and mercy freely poured upon us we are restored, forgiven and will live eternally with him. But it is not compulsory – it is for us to choose.

CONCLUSION

So can we sum up what's involved in choosing God's ancient path? In Mark 12:29-31 Jesus used these words revealed to God's people through Moses taken from the ancient reliable paths of scripture in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'.... 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.

These words represent principles for Godly living as revealed through Moses. Basically Jesus was saying – get these right and everything else falls into place. It sounds like a pretty good way to live. But just like God's people of Jeremiah's day we too as fallen people are naturally selfish – therefore following these commands (as I mentioned earlier) challenges us because these ancients words call us to live a disciplined, un-selfish, Godly life.

To truly love goes against our natural inclinations. It's only possible to practice love if we allow God to help us set aside our own desires and instincts, so we can give love while expecting **nothing in return**. The more we live disciplined lives, through reading God's word, following his path, praying daily, following Christ's example, responding to God's amazing love, grace and mercy poured upon us through the sacrifice of Christ the more we become like Christ and consequently the more we reveal his love to others.

Yes - as we walk into 2012 let's keep our eyes open and remain vigilant to all that this world tempts us with because it's easy to be misled. But at the same time let's also keep remembering there is only one way to find true peace and "rest for your souls" - walk God's path. So as New Testament Christians read verse 16 again: 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**.

Now hear this parallel verse spoken by Jesus in Matthew 11:29: Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and **you will find rest for your souls**.

Reading these words it is tempting to think following God's path is an easy option. Yes – Jesus frees us from the burdens of sin and weariness in our search for God. We live eternally now and find our lives enriched in ways that others (who don't know Christ) cannot comprehend. But it doesn't mean it is necessarily always effortless.

Earlier I described my family climbing up Snowden – we had to decide between two different routes and chose the more challenging option. It was not the easy route that the majority of the tourists take and we took a risk climbing 'the razor's edge'. But boy-o-boy was it exciting, fulfilling, enriching and memorable.

So moving into this New Year what path will you follow? The easy option that the majority takes doing simply what you please or the more challenging path that although it might look harder and more disciplined from a distance it does in fact offer a journey that brings fulfilment, enrichment, love and an inner peace that is difficult to describe unless we continue discovering it for ourselves by allowing God's spirit to indwell and lead our hearts.

So as we begin this year - Stand at the crossroads and look (look in here - God's word); ask for the ancient paths (Pray through what you find), ask where the good way is, and walk in it (in other words live it out), and you will find rest for your souls.