

Jeremiah 6:16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 March 2014

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] What do you pursue? The Founding Fathers across the pond considered the pursuit of happiness an inalienable human right. Whether it is or is not, I'm not sure, but it certainly is a prominent feature of our shared humanity that the pursuit of happiness is a common trait across cultures and ethnicities and generations. We all want to be happy. I wouldn't go so far as to say that we all just want to be happy, but I think most of us do want to be happy.

But are we condemned to ever pursuing and never finding? The very phrase, the pursuit of happiness, does somewhat leave us with that concern that we can pursue and pursue and pursue, but perhaps never find. Is the fun or the frustration only in the chase, in the pursuit? Is there a roadmap that can point us in the right direction? I think we all know from personal experience that a wrong turn or an unwise decision can often lead us to a place of pain or unhappiness. But what to do when we stand at the crossroads is to a crossroads and don't know where to turn? Can God help? Is God interested? Has He anything to say? The prophet Jeremiah, often unfairly caricatured as a miserable so-and-so, is firmly of the opinion that God is very much interested in your happiness, and crucially is of the view that you are not condemned to only pursuing, but can actually arrive and find the thing pursued. Jeremiah, or God, through Jeremiah, uses the language of rest for your soul. Rest for your soul. Deep and grounded happiness, or contentment, or peace that anchors your very being. Rest for your soul. In the passage that we've read, and very particularly verse 16, where we will be focusing our thoughts and attentions this morning, we have recorded words that were first directed to the people of God in the 7th century B.C., but that ring out with a hope-filled and contemporary clarity today. Now, before we identify the big truths that we find in our passage, let's just for a moment consider the city and generation to whom the words were first addressed. We've read the passage from the beginning of chapter 6, and we see that that the words are addressed to Jerusalem and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem, from the reading, it's clear, was in a mess, big time. It was in serious trouble. And the prophet prophesies the impending doom of Jerusalem. And the prophet's description is, is nothing if not vivid. And while it's not our intention, nor does time allow us to go into any detail as to the description that we have, let's just notice a few choice examples of what the prophet says that will give us a flavor, albeit a very bitter one, of the panorama there in Jerusalem. What are some of the things that the prophet very vividly says?

Well, he speaks of Jerusalem as a fountain of wickedness. Notice the very vivid and dramatic language that can generate this picture in our mind. As a well pours out its water, there in verse 7, as a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness. What a vivid picture of the state of affairs in Jerusalem, a fountain of wickedness.

The prophet goes on and speaks of how violence and destruction resound in her. There in that same verse, resound in her. That's the noise that you hear day by day and in a permanent and tragic way, violence and destruction. The inhabitants are described, all of them, as greedy for gain.

Then in verse 13, from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain. And in the midst of all of this crisis, there is an absence of leadership, certainly an absence of leadership with integrity, and that in itself is crippling the city. Then in that same verse 13, from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain. Prophets and priests alike all practice deceit. Those who ought to be guiding the city and its inhabitants in the right way are rather going in a diametrically opposed direction.

[5 : 50] And then very soberly and solemnly, we're told of how the city no longer knows what it is to feel ashamed for the manner in which it is behaving. Then in verse 15, are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? Surely at least there's some shame. No, they have no shame at all. And then so memorably, they do not even know how to blush. They do not even know how to blush. Now, I don't know about you, but this all sounds eerily familiar, this description. It's a description that fits not only for Jerusalem a couple of millennia or more ago. And of course, as a result of all of this, we've just been looking at some snapshots to introduce us into what we want to go on to say. But as a result of all this, there is this imminent prospect of judgment that awaits them. So, they will fall among the fallen.

They will be brought down when I punish them, says the Lord. But in this context, we find words of hope.

There is a shaft of light in a dark place and directions to a better place, a seriously better place than where they are now. And this shaft of light, these words of hope are indeed the verse that we want to think about this morning. Verse 16 of Jeremiah chapter 6, this is what the Lord says, These words are directed to a city. They're directed to Jerusalem. They're directed to a generation, Jeremiah's generation, but they're directed to every generation. They're words directed to a people, but also to those individuals who make up a people. And they are words that are directed to you, and they are directed to you today, this morning. 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.

What is the big message that rings out from this verse to you? What are the big truths for you today? Well, let me suggest that we can find three big truths, certainly three that we want to notice and consider for a moment this morning. Three big truths, and let's start with a real biggie, the one that maybe dominates, although perhaps not the one that's most immediately obvious. And the first big truth that I find here, and that I want to direct your attention to this morning is this, that God loves you. God loves you. Now, I say that may be a surprising one to begin with, because you look at the verse and you say, well, I find no mention here of God's love. The Word, indeed, may be absent, indeed is absent, but the evidence of God's love is present and compelling. To love somebody. We think of a definition of what it is to love somebody. One, I think, helpful and good definition is this, that to love somebody is to desire, and we are able to secure for them their welfare and happiness.

There's only one, I think, reasonable definition of what it means to love somebody. Well, this is precisely what we find in the purposes of God as revealed in this verse. He wants the very best for those He is addressing. We've already established that He's addressing you. He wants the very best for you. He wants rest for your soul. The very best that He could desire for you is what He does desire for you, that you would know and experience rest for your soul. So, whoever you are, whatever brought you here this morning, whatever you believe or don't believe, however cynical or hardened or aloof you are or like to portray yourself to be, let me tell you this, with joyful conviction, God loves you.

[10 : 38] That's the big truth, and it's such a big truth, it probably merits being developed a little more, but we're just going to leave it there and move on to a second big truth that we will need to detain ourselves on for a little longer. You see, that desire of God for your greatest good, for rest for your soul is manifest, finds expression in what God does, and that is our second big truth, and it is this, that God speaks to you. Yes, God loves you. He desires the very best for you, but also, and secondly, God speaks to you. The words God speaks have a goal in mind, that you would find rest for your soul. They are words of direction. You are standing at the crossroads, unsure as to what direction you must turn, and there is a voice from heaven that speaks to you today. And what does He say? What does God say? Well, God addresses you with a threefold call.

We want to think of these three elements of this threefold call by which God speaks to you. First of all, there is a call to reflect. There's also a call to investigate, and then thirdly, there's a call to walk. God speaks to you, and He speaks to you with this threefold call. Let's think of these elements, the three elements of it each in turn. First of all, a call to reflect. Notice what the verse says. This is what the Lord says. Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths.

Very especially the first part. Stand at the crossroads and look. We face multiple crossroads in our race or stumble through life, and crossroads are God-given opportunities for us. The tragedy is that we often just carry on in the face of a crossroads with the shutters firmly attached without realizing that we have choices to make and options to consider.

What God is doing here in this verse as He addresses the people of Jerusalem so long ago, but also as He addresses you and me this morning, what God is doing is that He is graciously and wisely calling us to reflect, to stop for a moment, to pause and to reflect. We need to stop and stand and look. We need to realize that we do have options. We don't have to go down in our life the route of least resistance, irrespective of its ultimate destination. Is that not so often what we do?

We identify the route of least resistance, where we will have less hassle, less trouble, less pain as we see it. Well, let's go down this route without even thinking about what is at the end of it. We don't stop. We don't stand. We don't reflect. We don't look. Well, yes, that's one option, but there's another one here that maybe I could go down. And God is saying, well, just stop for a moment.

[13 : 52] Just pause, stand, and look. You see, we're not obliged to go with the flow or with the crowd. We can stop and stand and look and see if where the crowd are going is where we want to be at all.

What is the end of where the crowd are going? We need to stop and reflect and look and consider. We can look ahead and consider the final destination of the road we choose to take.

Some people might think, well, we can't ever know what's at the end of the road. There's so many twists and turns. So, whatever road I choose, ultimately, you know, it's a toss of a coin. I don't know what's at the end of it, but that's not true. We won't know all the details, but we are assured that we can, as we stop and as we reflect and as we look, we can have a very good idea of what is at the end of any given road that we choose to take. There is this call to reflect, and this is so basic. In some ways, it seems so obvious. Of course, that's something we should do, and yet it is so often what we fail to do. We're too busy. We're too preoccupied, too surrounded by the crowd. You know, we're on this route that's going in whatever direction it is, and it's just so difficult to just get out of the crowd and say, well, maybe I'll just go a different way.

I don't know what crossroads you are at, but will you stop and stand and look and reflect?

God calls you to reflect. Do so before it's too late to do so. A call to reflect. But there's also a second element to this threefold call of God as He speaks to you, and that is there is a call to investigate. Then in verse 16 again, this is what the Lord says, stand at the crossroads and look.

[15:57] Ask for the ancient paths. Ask where the good way is and walk in it. Notice there the twice-repeated call to ask. It's not enough to stop and to pause and to look. We need to do more than that. God says to the citizens of Jerusalem, and He says to us, ask. Ask for directions. I don't know if you're any good at asking for directions. I don't know if it's a particularly male trait, or that's probably very sexist to say that, but I'm not very good at asking for directions. I really sort of don't like to ask for directions, so I'll go around in circles, you know, for, oh, an inordinate amount of time, rather than just stop the car, get out, and ask somebody. It's just a little bit embarrassing. I don't know, and I'm probably too stubborn to change. That's a terrible thing to say. Of course, I should change. I do sometimes ask, but generally it's not something I'm very keen on doing, despite the very gracious proddings of the person who's seated next to me in the car who shall remain nameless, that that maybe would be the right thing to do. Now, I realize it makes no sense to not ask for directions.

Well, on a car journey, that can lead to inconvenience. It can lead to maybe getting to where you want to go a little later than you had intended. But in life, to fail to ask, to fail to investigate, is dangerous. It's very dangerous. But what would God have us discover by asking? What is it that we need to find? What is it that we're looking for that we can find by asking? Well, what does the text say? Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths. Ask where the good way is.

What we want to discover is the good way. Well, that sounds great, but what's the good way? It's also known, it's the same way described in two different ways, also known or described as the ancient paths. But what are the ancient paths? What is the good way? Let me suggest three complementary descriptions of what really is just one way, this good way, or the ancient paths. What is this way that we're looking for that we need to ask about? First of all, let me suggest that it is the way of obedience. You see, for the original audience, the Jews in Jerusalem who were heeding these words of words of God through the prophet, when they would hear this language of the ancient paths, very especially this language of the ancient paths, or the good way, those who were even moderately literate in biblical truth would have understood that this is speaking of the way of life ordered by God

God in the law, in God's law. God's law was given to God's people not as a wearisome burden, but as a way of blessing. Listen to Moses as he commends God's law to God's people as we have it recorded for us in Deuteronomy chapter 4 and verse 40. Keep his decrees and commands which I am giving you today so that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time. But notice God's intention, notice God's purpose in giving his people his law, that it may go well with you. This is the good way. This is the good way that you are to walk in, the way of obedience. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 35 also speaks of this good way in very beautiful language as he speaks of and describes the way of holiness, a highway of holiness upon which God's people are to walk, the way of obedience to God. This is the way. But there's a problem.

The problem is that we are all disobedient. And so as those who are disobedient, we fail to find rest by our obedience. Were we perfectly obedient, then that obedience would indeed grant to us the rest that is spoken of. But the problem is that we're not. We're not obedient. We disobey. And so this good way is not only the way of obedience, but it is also, and this is not an alternative, but together, it is also the way of forgiveness. You see, in the very law given by God that we have just mentioned, God makes provision for your disobedience. God's way provides for our forgiveness, forgiveness that is secured by sacrifice, by atoning sacrifice, by the shedding of blood. In the Old Testament, this involved the offering and sacrificing of animals without stain or blemish to atone or pay for sin and secure forgiveness for the worshiper. But ultimately, as the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 10 recognizes, and let's just read what he says there at the beginning of the chapter, the law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves.

[21 : 35] For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered?

For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. These sacrifices, the writer understands and makes clear, are sacrifices that serve as a reminder of our condition and of our need, but that point to another, to one coming to a perfect sacrifice, the one who in himself constitutes for us the good way.

And so it's not only the way of obedience that we are to be directed to, not only even the way of forgiveness, but also the way of the gospel. Jesus is the Lamb of God. He is God's perfect sacrifice who takes away, who takes away the sin of the world. In Him you can find enduring forgiveness and lasting rest and deep happiness. He has always been the way. He's not just become the way when He came into this world.

He's always been the way as the efficacy of His atoning death extends into the past as well as into the future, enveloping us as well. How do we find this good way? Well, we're told we have to ask. Ask where the good way is. Ask for the ancient paths. And who are we to ask? Where are we to ask? Well, we ask in God's Word, and we ask of God's people who have already been shown the good way and who by grace are already walking on the ancient paths. They are those that you can ask that you would find this good way, these ancient paths. So we are called to reflect. We're called to investigate. But we're also called to walk. Again, in the same verse, stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths.

Ask where the good way is and walk in it. And walk in it. It's not enough to reflect. Reflection is necessary. It's not enough to investigate, though investigation is required. It's not enough to discover what the good way is. It's not enough to discover the one who is the good way. You have to walk in it. You need to start walking as you trust in Jesus, perhaps for the first time. And you need to keep on walking as you continually trust in and follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior. There's a call to walk.

[24 : 37] Are you walking in the good way? Are you walking along the ancient paths? God loves you. God speaks to you with this threefold call to reflect, to investigate, to walk. But then thirdly and finally, God provides for you. God provides for you. What does God provide to those He loves and speaks to? What does He provide to those who listen to Him and so reflect and investigate and walk?

What does He provide? Well, He provides what He promises. He provides rest for your soul. He provides directions to that place of rest and happiness and security. But you know, the wonderful thing is that when we follow His directions, we discover that the rest He promises is to be found in Himself. He doesn't point us to some other place. Go there, and there's lots of resources for you that will grant you rest for your soul. Really what He says is, come to Me, and I will grant you rest for your soul. And of course, that is a truth never more beautifully expressed than by the eternal Son of God, than by our Lord and Savior Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11 and verse 28, we know the words, Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. And then goes on to explain the nature of that rest. Rest for your soul. These are big truths that we find in our text this morning. God loves you. God speaks to you. God provides for you. But we can't leave matters there.

I need to ask you the question, as I hope I would ask myself, what will you do? What will you do? What did the good citizens of Jerusalem do? Though the adjective good is rather generous. What did they do when God demonstrated that He loved them, when God spoke to them, when God was willing to provide for them? What did they do? 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.

We will not walk in it. We read it, and we find it hard to believe. What utter folly! What tragic foolishness! A God who loves them. A God who speaks to them. A God who provides for them. And how do they respond with pride and folly and stubbornness? We will not walk in it. You know, it makes me think of the stubbornness of a small child who just doesn't want to do what mom and dad know is good for them.

I'm not going to do it. You think, well, we'd grow out of childish ways. But so often we don't. So often this is our response to God as He demonstrates His love for us, as He speaks to us, as He pleads with us, as He presents to us the gracious provision that He has made for us. And we say, no, it's not for me.

[28 : 23] I'm not going to walk along that way. That's not the way I want to go down. Not for me. Not now. The folly of man. Folly that is tragically replicated from generation to generation.

A folly born of rebellious pride that robs us of rest and happiness and peace. So what about you? Jesus has a final word for you this morning. And listen well and listen good.

He says to you, I am the way. I am the good way. I am the truth and the life. Will you walk in it?

Let us pray.