

"Ancient Paths For A New Year"

Early this week Byron shared a post from the Gospel Coalition, written by a friend of his, Jeremy Linneman, titled: *Skip Resolutions in 2019 – Make a Rule of Life*. Jeremy said he used to love making New Year's resolutions – but he loved making them more than he enjoyed keeping them. The point of the article was to stress that while resolutions are often overrated commitments are often underrated. A rule of life is an *ancient tradition* that focuses on an intentional plan to build into your life those spiritual commitments, rhythms or practices that best nurture your life in God.

Without a plan we end up reactive, scattered, hurried and exhausted that's not good. There is a better way. You may remember in August of last year we did a series of messages on what we called *The Ancient Paths*. **Jeremiah 6:16**, *Thus says the LORD: "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'* The passage talks about the "good way" and "rest for your souls". We need and want that in this New Year. So for the month of January we're going to take a break from our larger series, *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life*, and revisit this theme.

What are these ancient paths? *The ancient paths by definition are not the next new thing. **The ancient paths are the time-tested, proven spiritual practices that strengthen devotion to God take you to good places and give you rest.*** The goal this month is to not just exhort you but to help you. I'm going to ask you to respond at several points in the message. The hope is that these short "interactive" elements will help you to apply the message. We're begin with what is most basic in the ancient paths. Our weekly gathering to worship.

First of all...

I. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO WORK ON WHAT WE DO WHEN WE WORSHIP TOGETHER?

Being a Christian is more than just weekend worship. That is true and yet, weekly, consistent, spiritual practice of worshipping together is one of the most ancient paths of spiritual formation. **Luke 4:16** said

this about Jesus, *And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day.* It was his *custom* or rule of life.

The ancient church, following Jesus' example, lived out the rhythm of weekly worship together. They met on the first day of the week. They called it, "*the Lord's day*". **Acts 2:42** says, *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Notice they not only met consistently but they *devoted* themselves to what they did together *when* they met to worship.

There are two reasons this is a great place to start in the New Year.

A. We are already doing it. Why not make the most of it?

Of all of the ancient paths or proven practices of fostering spiritual devotion this is one that most of us are already do fairly consistently. So let's explore if there are ways strengthen this time for the glory of God, the cause of his kingdom and our own spiritual growth.

B. We are already doing it. Why not make it a launch pad for life?

If we strengthen what we do when we worship together, could we not apply what we learn about worshipping together as we live out our relationship with God individually during the week? That's the goal.

So in light of all of that....

II. HOW CAN WE MAKE THE MOST OF OUR WEEKLY WORSHIP?

For this message we're going to look at the first four movements in our worship. At the end of the month we will look at the final three.

First...

A. We begin with a call to worship that we take seriously.

The call to worship is a word that comes from God to us in Scripture to call us to do something specific. It calls us to turn from all of this world's distractions and all other preoccupations and to focus our hearts, minds and actions on the priority of worshipping God. Our call to worship this morning was from **Psalm 28:6-7**, *The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.* Those words are put in Holy Scripture because they tell us what *we* are being called to do: to affirm God as our strength and shield, to trust in him for the help we need, to exult in him with song and give our thanks to him.

The call to worship is a gracious thing. The whole world is fed by lies about what is real and important. The reality of God and spiritual life is diminished and an anxious preoccupation with money, things politics, this world, surrounds us and slips like a fog into our hearts. We begin to assume that the consumer culture and the machinery of life is what matters most and then some worship leader says: *“Come, let us worship...”* And the call to worship is an invitation to get it straight and see it clearly. We are weak but God is welcoming and he wants us to worship him for our good and his glory. The call to worship is gracious.

The call to worship is a serious thing. When I first became a Christian I thought of worship, as preliminary warm-up for what mattered which was the message. Only when the sermon began did I really need to pay attention or engage and enter in. A light came on when someone pointed out that the calls to worship in Scripture had an imperative quality. The Bible repeatedly calls us to worship and sing to the Lord. **Psalm 100:1-2** says *Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! ² Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!* We don't just worship when and if we feel like it. We worship God as a spiritual practice that is formative.

Here's the first application: Take a moment and consider. What really happens with you when you hear the call to worship? What do you think and do? The call to worship is a word from God. The book of **James 1:22** says *be doers of the word and not hearers only.* **Hebrews 3:7-8** says, *today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.* When you hear the call to worship do you respond with a responsive heart? There is a verse in **Psalm 27:8** that I love. It has this dialogue between God and the believers going on. It says. *You have said, “seek my face”, my heart says to you: “Your face LORD, Do I seek”.* Let's do something together now. Even though the worship in song is over and we are hearing God's word, let's respond. You do not even have to close your eyes and bow your heads. In your heart – that's how the psalm puts it – take a moment to center your soul and to say to your God these words: *You have said, “seek my face”, my heart says to you: “Your face LORD, Do I seek”.* What a difference it makes when you say that to God and mean it. In this service Lord, as we worship I will seek your face. Learn to do that together with us and then plan to take that into your private worship with God. Seek his face.

We begin with the call to worship and then, secondly...

B. In response to the call to worship we sing and praise God.

The passage we read from **Isaiah 6** is a dramatic vision. In the **verse 1** the prophet Isaiah sees *a vision of the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"* Clearly this is a uniquely powerful vision of the glory of God. But it also teaches us something. When a worship leader brings a Scriptural call to worship, he or she is calling us to join the worship in heaven that is already and always offering God praise. Our response is to enter into it wholeheartedly.

Praise is not optional for true worshippers. When I first became a Christian not only did I wrongly think of the worship as just preliminary to the message but I also thought of the singing as optional for the comfortable. I was self-conscious about singing so I didn't. But as I began to follow Jesus and listen to Scripture I discovered that God calls us to sing and worship him. To sing God's praises is graciously compulsory. **Psalm 147:1** says *Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.*

Praise is not optional but it mustn't be prefunctory. How appropriate was it, in light of **Isaiah 6** that we sang *Holy, Holy, Holy*, earlier. But what were you thinking and feeling when we sang it?

Here's the second application: Think of how those words remind us of who God is. He is Holy, the meaning is captured in the words, *Only Thou art Holy there is none beside Thee* – there is no one like him, *perfect in power, love and purity.* Meditate on that and praise him for that. It is easy to waste this time for worship: just let the words waft past you or worse to just endure it because you don't like hymns or we don't sing it loud enough. What if you were to press in? To walk the ancient paths is not only to show up but to press into the worship. Let's take a minute or two to pray and, in prayer, practice praise.

Let's bow our heads now and close our eyes and be still. *Almighty God, you are Holy, Holy, Holy, help us to reflect on your beauty and glory and to worship you. -- Now, take a moment to think about the God we worship. Praise him that he is holy, merciful and mighty, perfect in power, love and purity. ---- Think of the beautiful relational*

and eternal mystery that he is God in three persons, who was and is and evermore shall be. ---- We praise you Lord, Amen.

We take the call to worship seriously. We respond with praise. The third thing is this:

C. In response to a renewed vision of God we confess our sin.

Notice what happens when Isaiah sees the reality of the Holy God. Once Isaiah has a vision of the glory of God he sees his own sin more clearly. What does he say in **verse 5**? *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"*

1 John 1:9-10, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.* There is a cleansing, healing, life-giving power in honest confession.

Here's the third application: In the song *Shine into our Night* we confessed that *We are not what we should be. We haven't sought what we should seek. Our hearts are bent our eyes are dim our finest works are staid with sin.* It is good to confess like that in the context of God's unconditional love and grace. It is also good to go deeper into our personal and individual issues. Our natural, default response is to be superficial about our sins and to minimize them or excuse them.

Lets take a moment to go a little deeper. Let's bow our heads and be still and humble and silently, inwardly, honestly confess our sins to our God. *Our Father in heaven you are good and gracious. Show us your grace and help us to face the darkness within us lest it deceive and ensare us. -- Take a moment and just quietly inwardly confess your sins to God. ---- Father, by your Holy Spirit help us see the sins that hide under pretence and excuse. Shine the light into any darkness in us so we can confess our sins clearly and receive the renewing grace that saves us from sin's deceptiveness and keeps us close to you. ---- Forgive, and cleanse and restore us Lord for Jesus' sake. Amen*

*We take the call to worship seriously and we respond with praise. We humbly confess our sins but it doesn't end there. Look at what happens with Isaiah. **Verses 6-7:** Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs*

from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

D. We receive God's assurance of grace and forgiveness.

We receive the promise that through Jesus, God washes us white as snow. The promise may come with a Scripture, or like today, with songs like, *His mercy is More*. As important as confession is, it is just as important to receive the promise that God's grace is greater than our sin.

Here's the fourth application: Receive the promise of Grace in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper, or Communion is the sign and seal of God's promised grace and full forgiveness. It shows us that God wants us to know that he forgives, fully and forever over and over again. Believe that and as you take the Lord's Supper as a believer in Jesus, say, "Thank you, Lord."

Conclusion

Think for a moment on this first worship service of the New Year, Is Jesus Christ your Savior? You need him. Our sins weigh us down and wear us out because we know we need to be right with God and we need a righteousness we can't achieve. Until we are reconciled to God we live like orphans on our own and there is no rest or trust. And deep in our hearts, at some level we don't even always know how to describe, we feel the anxious need to prove ourselves. We critique ourselves, then condemn, then justify. We look for a satisfaction we cannot find.

God, if we let him, puts an end to that through Jesus. He tells us the hard humbling truth that we cannot validate, or satisfy or save ourselves. We are sinners and we need a Savior. Jesus walked the paths of perfect righteousness for us. He gave himself to pay for our sins on the cross. He rose again and offers his saving grace to us for the asking. You can't earn what he offers. You don't have to try. You have to humble yourself and accept it as a gift of grace. Do that. Trust in Jesus. Then if you trust in him. Because you trust in him walk the ancient paths with and for him.

Amen.