

ANCIENT PATHS INSTITUTE

White Paper Series | Intro

Stand at the Crossroads

The Return to the Ancient Paths — An Introduction

*“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, ...”*

— Jeremiah 6:16

An Introduction to the Series

1. The First Cry

In the days of Jeremiah the covenant people of God had drifted, slowly and over generations, into a state of deep syncretism. They had not abandoned the Lord outright. They had mixed Him in. Asherah poles stood beside the temple. The high places remained in the hills. The household gods sat on the shelves of the same families who still kept the appointed feasts. The priests still served at the altar; the prophets still prophesied in the king's hall; the people still gathered at Jerusalem at the appointed seasons. The form was intact. The substance had been hollowed out from inside by a long, patient compromise no single generation could be blamed for and every generation had inherited.

The fruit was predictable. The nation slid into idolatry, injustice, and immorality. The widows were not defended. The poor were sold for a pair of sandals. The blood of the innocent stained the temple courts themselves. And the armies of Babylon were already at the gates. The end was near, and the people did not yet know how near.

Into that hour the Lord sent a weeping prophet to the city. Jeremiah did not come with a new program. He came with one final plea, simple enough for a child and severe enough that the elders of the people understood exactly what it meant.

“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.”’” — Jeremiah 6:16, NKJV

The plea and the refusal stand in the same breath. The Lord did not threaten before He pleaded. He pleaded first. He told the people exactly where to look — the ancient paths, the good way, the road their fathers had walked when the covenant was kept. He promised them exactly what they would find on it — rest for their souls. And the people, gathered at the very crossroads He had pointed them to, looked at the road He had identified by name and said, in one short sentence, *We will not walk in it.*

The siege closed soon after. The walls fell. The temple burned. The people were taken in chains to Babylon, and the Lord they had refused to walk back to went into exile with them, because He had not stopped loving the bride who had broken His heart. The final plea had gone out. The final plea had been rejected. The fruit of the decision was, in the prophet's own word, *pure devastation.*

2. The Same Crossroads, Again

That day is once again upon the people of God.

The Lord is not announcing a new doctrine. He is repeating the old plea. The same cry that went out at the gates of Jerusalem in the sixth century before Christ is going out now at the gates of the Western church, and the language has not changed because the diagnosis has not changed. The

body that bears the King's name has drifted, slowly and across generations, into a syncretism every bit as patient and as patient-no-longer as the one Jeremiah saw. The American church has not openly renounced the Lord. She has mixed Him in. The high places remain in the hills. The household gods sit on the shelves of the same families who still gather on Sunday morning. The people still gather at the appointed seasons of a calendar nobody seriously asks the Father to confirm. The form is intact. The substance has been hollowed out from inside by a long, patient compromise no single generation can be blamed for and every generation has inherited.

The particular shape of the compromise is unmistakable to anyone willing to look. The church has been turned into a business and Jesus has been made the product. The bride He purchased with His own blood has been recategorized as the customer the business exists to serve. The metrics by which the body is now measured — attendance, revenue, reach, influence, brand strength — are not metrics the New Testament uses, and the metrics the New Testament does use — disciples made, saints equipped, the body built up in love, the lost sought, the weak strengthened, elders raised — have been quietly retired because they cannot be put on a quarterly dashboard. The pagan logic of the marketplace has been laid over the apostolic logic of the household, and the household has been almost entirely silenced inside the very building that was supposed to house it.

This is the high place. This is the Asherah pole beside the temple. This is the household god on the shelf. And the King, whose patience has carried His bride across a long century of drift, is now standing at the crossroads pleading with her one last time, in language no one inside the building can mistake.

3. The Valley of Decision

There is no third option. There is no watered-down half measure that will suffice.

The body that has been formed by a culture of nuance, of both-and, of careful negotiation between the apostolic substance and the inherited apparatus, will not hear that sentence well. It is the sentence the Lord has nevertheless spoken. Elijah said it on Carmel in the hearing of a nation that had been balancing the worship of YHWH against the cult of Baal for three generations and had become very comfortable with the balance. “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21, NKJV). The prophet Joel said it of the day the Lord would finally close the negotiation. “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision” (Joel 3:14, NKJV).

There is no third option. There is no watered-down half measure that will suffice. The valley of decision has no middle path. It has the King, or it has the systems of men. Choose this day whom you will serve.

The valley of decision is not a wide place. It is a narrow place between two armies, where the body that has spent a generation refusing to choose is finally compelled to choose. The cascade of public failures, the empirical falsification of the celebrity-pastor model, the exposure of abuse the

institutions concealed for decades, the hollowing of attendance even where the apparatus persists — none of this is an accident. It is the King’s own hand inside His own house, and it is moving with the precision of a Father who has decided that His bride will not be left in the high places one hour longer than she chooses to remain in them.

4. What Return Actually Is

The return to the ancient paths is not a slogan. It is not a soundtrack. It is not a Sunday morning emotion that returns to its routine on Monday. It is repentance — brutal, specific, and turning — of the kind Scripture has always required of the body when the King’s plea has reached the gate.

It is the immediacy of Nineveh. “So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ... Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands” (Jonah 3:5, 8, NKJV). The pagan city repented in a day. The covenant city refused for forty years.

It is the gravity of Nehemiah’s congregation, standing in the rain at the Water Gate, the Book of the Law open before them. “Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. ... They stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God” (Nehemiah 9:1, 3, NKJV). A quarter of the day spent reading the Scriptures. A quarter of the day spent confessing the sins those Scriptures had exposed.

It is the courage of Josiah, the young king whose first act on hearing the Law was not a sermon series and not a strategic plan. He tore down the high places. He defiled the altars. He broke the pillars in pieces. He removed the priests of Baal, the priests of the host of heaven, the mediums and the spiritists, every shrine and every Asherah and every artifact of the syncretism his fathers had built and inherited and protected (2 Kings 23). He did not negotiate with the form. He did not preserve the most beloved of the high places. He tore them down — *all of them* — because the King had spoken, and the King had not asked which ones could be kept.

And it is the demand the forerunner shouted at the Jordan, in a wilderness the institutions had abandoned, with the axe already lying at the root of the tree. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ ... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:8–9, NKJV).

The return to the ancient paths is travail over what has been built without His authority and a turning, in real action, toward what He commanded from the beginning. It produces fruit a customer cannot fake and a market cannot manufacture. Less than that, the King does not accept. He never has. He has never told a covenant people that He would be content with the form when the substance had been given away.

5. The Two Roads, Side by Side

The same return that produced the awakening at Nineveh, the homecoming at the Water Gate, the reformation under Josiah, and the great awakenings of every century since, is on the table now. The bride who turns will eat the harvest the prophet promised on the far side of the famine. The King who is calling her back is the same King who carries lambs in His bosom and gently leads those who are with young. Reformation in His hands has never been demolition. It has been healing, and harvest, and homecoming.

But the same refusal that took Judah into Babylon is also on the table. The Lord does not chasten forever. The plea does not stand forever. The crossroads is a place a body stands at for a season, not a place a body lives. The hour comes — Jeremiah's generation discovered this in the smoke of the burning temple — when the plea has been spoken for the final time and the only thing left is the consequence of the refusal.

There is no third path. There has never been a third path. There has always been the King, or the systems of men, and the body that thought it could indefinitely hold both has finally been told plainly that it cannot.

6. The Cry Is Going Out

They say history repeats itself because no one listens the first time.

The cry of Jeremiah is going out, here, now, today, at the gates of the body that bears the King's name. The papers in this series are not academic exercises. They are written witnesses to a plea that is going out one final time, in this hour, to a bride whose King has decided that He will not leave her in the high places. The papers diagnose the drift. They name the apparatus. They show the witnesses the Spirit has already raised up. They put a roadmap into the hands of any shepherd, household, or saint who is ready to walk it. But the papers do not, finally, decide anything. The bride decides.

The crossroads is in front of you. The ancient path is the one the King has identified by name. The good way is the way your apostolic fathers walked when the covenant was kept. The rest He has promised is real, and it is on the road He has pointed to and not on any other.

What will you do?

The cry is going out. The crossroads is in front of you. The hour is the valley of decision. The cry is the cry of the King to His bride. Stand at the crossroads. Ask for the ancient paths. And walk in it.

What will you do with the call?