

## **“Moving Forward Looking Backward”**

**Jeremiah 6:16**

**Dec. 31, 2017**

**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

I'm reading but a single verse, but first a word about its context. Jeremiah was preaching one of his many sermons exposing the unbelief and the disobedience of the Jews of his day. They had accommodated the true faith of Moses to the surrounding paganism. Worshipping other gods than Yahweh, they also inevitably compromised the exacting moral standards of the Law of Moses, choosing instead to live like the people around them. As a result, they also betrayed the life of the covenant community, each person seeking his or her own profit and pleasure without regard to the interests of others. *This is what always happens, of course, when the Lordship of God is denied!* They were sexually immoral, the rich were mistreating the poor, and honesty in personal and business relationships had become a rarity in Jewish society. And so, Jeremiah prophesied the Lord's judgment of his people for their infidelity to him and to one another. It is in the midst of this sermon that we hear Jeremiah explaining *what the Jews should have done and what they did instead.*

“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.’”

As we face the New Year, *anno Domini* 2018, it is well that we take stock; that we think about the world in which we live, about our culture, and what it means for our Christian faith going forward. Like virtually every human culture before it, our modern western culture is both impressive and repulsive. To different people, depending on their point of view, it is impressive for different reasons and to different people it is repulsive for different reasons, but everyone for his or her own reasons finds it both impressive and repulsive. And, to be sure, we Christians are hardly the only ones taking stock of this culture – its accomplishments, its achievements on the one hand, its sins and its corruptions on the other – and of our world at the beginning of 2018. All sorts of people are offering their evaluations.

We are a people agog at the future. We even have people who style themselves as “futurists,” predictors of the future. Most of the time they prove to be false prophets, but prophets they are. In our modern age, in which there have been such notable technological advancements, many are predicting more of the same: the end of the internal combustion engine, the creation of new forms of cheap, sustainable, and eco-friendly energy, through gene-therapy the elimination of the diseases that sweep most of us away before we are 80 or 90 years of age, space travel and the permanent settlement of human beings on other planets, even the creation of a newer, better, happier, more peaceful human being. We hear a lot of such predictions, especially from the tech world. They are on the verge of this or that development that will transform the world and make it something altogether new and better.

But not everyone is sanguine about the future. Others point out that our standard of living has stagnated, that real breakthroughs are now rarer than they were fifty or sixty years ago. There has been nothing recently that remotely resembles the transformations of culture brought about by the widespread availability of clean water and electricity, by the birth of aviation, by the

invention of antibiotics, or the harnessing of nuclear power. The impact of innovation on the American economy over the last decade, for example, has been a paltry half of one per cent, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. None of the 20 most prescribed drugs in the United States came to the market in the last decade. Houses, appliances, and automobiles look much like and perform much like they did a generation ago. Airplanes go no faster than they did in the 1950s. You can get a quote quickly from an insurance company on line today, but you're likely to pay a similar percentage of your income on hazard insurance as your parents did or, in fact, pay more. [Some from Richard Doster, "A Faith of Infinite Ideas and Innovation," *byFaith* (July 10, 2017)]

And, of course, much of the new technology that so amazes us – computers, the internet, and the cell phone – has had as many deleterious effects as salutary. For the first time, pornography is readily available at the push of a button or the touch of a screen wrecking untold damage on the souls of men and on their wives and families; immense numbers of young men into their thirties are spending months' worth of every year playing video games. Social media is bringing out the worst features of the human spirit, its narcissism, its triviality, and its cruelty. But worse is yet to come!

According to Steven Hawking, the celebrated Cambridge astrophysicist, we have nothing to expect but gloom and doom over the next century. Indeed, he thinks our planet has only some 100 years of life remaining. If global warming doesn't get us, a meteor will. If the meteors continue to miss us, some pandemic will do us in. And, if somehow, we escape those threats, the earth's growing population will overwhelm the planet's capacity to provide for everyone. What is needed, he thinks, is that we create ways for us to colonize other planets, because ours will soon be unable to sustain human life. A year ago, he thought that we had a thousand years, a year later he has reduced his estimate to a mere century. Some of that, he makes clear, is due to the election of Donald Trump. In any case, very soon the earth will be as hot as Venus and unable to sustain human life. *Well, which is it? Are we on the cusp of a glorious flourishing of human life through innovation or are we hurtling toward the abyss? And how are we to know?*

Christians look at these questions in a very different way, or, at least they should. Fundamental to our outlook is that this world is our world only in a secondary sense. *It is God's world first.* He made it, he rules it, it lives or it dies at his pleasure. We are not ultimately in control of human history and we are certainly not ultimately in control of the human future. The Bible often rings the changes on that brute fact. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof!" What is more, the Lord God has promised that the earth would not be destroyed until that time he has appointed for the culmination of human history. We are reminded of that promise every time we see a rainbow in the sky!

But, more than that, and on the human level itself, throughout time human beings, made as they have been in the image of God himself, have found ways to overcome the challenges they faced, so extraordinarily inventive as they are, created as they have been in the image of the Creator himself and gifted as they have been with such extraordinary powers. We marvel at what our cell phones can do, but they are cheap baubles compared to the human brain. My iphone has 16 gigabytes of memory. With that it can handle about 2 million pages of text or 11,000 photographs or 4,500 songs. Amazing, or so we think.

The human brain's memory capacity is equal to one petabyte. A petabyte is the equivalent of somewhat more than 1 million gigabytes, or 62,500 times the memory of my iPhone! The entire Library of Congress contains some 235 terabytes of data. A petabyte is four times larger! Even sinful human beings have an extraordinary record of success in overcoming all manner of problems and in the creating of technological wonders, and we haven't yet spoken of all that human beings have created that has adorned and ennobled human life: from art to music to literature, to discovery, to the love of marriage and family, and so on. [Cf. Doster, *Ibid.*]

But, much more significant, the Christian knows not only who and what a human being *is* but why the story of mankind's life has taken the course that it has. We know how human life began and so we know why the human being is such an extraordinary being and possessed of such breathtaking powers. We know why from the very beginning human beings were creating masterpieces of culture, were changing the world in which they lived, and were accomplishing things that still today leave us baffled and humbled: whether the pyramids of Giza or the epic poems of Homer or the calculations of the ancient astronomers. We know where this creative urge comes from. We know that human beings were made for fellowship with God himself.

But we also know how it happened that human beings descended into such moral beggarliness, why human beings, endowed with such remarkable powers and potential, should have become so contemptible, petty, cruel, stupid, and insensible to their pride and selfishness. We know about the creation of man, but we also know about his fall. We know that man, for all his genius and his potential for great good, is now curved in upon himself, a rebel against the God who gave him life, and determined to repudiate his very nature as a person made in the image of the living and true God. *Man is at one and the same time God-like and a petulant child!*

So, it is not difficult for us to understand how human beings could have created the internet or why it should now be so often put to such to such sordid and corrupt and harmful uses by pornographers, by hackers, and by ordinary people talking endlessly about themselves to anyone who will listen.

We live in a day when people worship progress and invest their hope in progress. But there has always been progress and it has always proved to be a double-edged sword. It solves some problems and creates others, the problems usually as sinister as the solutions are remarkable. *Christians take all of this in stride.* Holy Scripture teaches us both why human beings will always accomplish tremendous things and why their accomplishments will invariably sour and leave mankind in trouble still. No mere creature is going to escape the judgment of his Creator when that creature refuses to acknowledge his place in God's world.

*This is Jeremiah's point.* The truth lies behind us in the great facts of creation, fall, and redemption. Those have always been the pillars of any true understanding of human life and history and they will always remain the pillars of any true understanding. Any other viewpoint, any other perspective, any other philosophy of life must fail because it is not compatible with reality, with the world as God made it, with human life as God created it, and with divine judgment upon human sin as God has promised to impose it.

Man's hope, from the moment of the Fall, was, has been, and will be deliverance from sin and divine judgment through the redemption that God accomplished for us through Jesus Christ. The only happy future for human beings has from the beginning been that future that opens before the man or woman who has faith in Jesus Christ. There has never been any other hope, there never will be, because man's problem is not technological, or astrophysical, or medical, or economic, or political. Man's problem is himself: his selfishness, his pride, his dishonesty, his cruelty, his covetousness, his lack of love for God and for other human beings. His problem is that his sinfulness has alienated him from God and separated God from him. And so deep is his bondage to his corrupt self that only God can rescue him from it.

Jeremiah's contemporaries remained blithely indifferent to Jeremiah's warnings because they didn't accept this view of things, this perspective on human life, what Jeremiah calls the "ancient paths." And so it was that they were killed or captured by the Babylonians, at that moment simply more technologically and politically advanced sinners than the Jews. And so it was that the Babylonians, in turn were conquered by the Greeks, who were, in turn swept aside by the Romans, and so on and so on. There was the story of Sisyphus rolling the bolder up the hill only to have it roll down again, precisely because sharp-sighted men realized long ago that man's efforts to build a kingdom on this earth are condemned to futility; such futility is the great story of human life.

Man's salvation, the *solution* to his problems lies in the grace of God bringing new spiritual life, in the law of God directing men and women into the paths of true goodness, and in another world far better than this one; a world without sin. Nothing else has ever given sure and solid hope to men and women in the face of the realities of human existence; nothing else ever shall. You would think that by now people would have learned that lesson, but that is precisely the nature of the bondage of human beings in sin. They are ever learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth. God must open their eyes or they will keep them tightly shut rather than have to see the world as it actually is and themselves as they actually are.

Of course, in Jeremiah's day, as in every day since, and as in our own, there are many prophets who tell us that there is another way forward than the ancient paths, another solution to our problems, another way of transforming human life, and another way of finding that way to that world we have been seeking. Jeremiah's view of the message of these so-called prophets we have in v. 14 of this same chapter 6.

"They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace."

The problem, according to such advisors – of which we have a great many today – is that they locate the human problem anywhere and everywhere else than where it actually may be found, in the human heart and in its rebellion against God. They will always have a ready audience. As Jeremiah put it at the end of the previous chapter (5:30-31):

"An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction: my people love to have it so..."

But the problem, of course, is that the wound of the people *is* serious, so serious only God can heal it. And unless it is healed, God's judgment must await, or, as Jeremiah says at the end of chapter 5:

“...my people love to have it so, *but what will you do when the end comes?*”

It is all very well to imagine that this or that will suffice to solve our problems – and don't let anyone kid you, human life is beset by immense and sinister problems, both intimately personal and public – but if we have misdiagnosed our disease and if our treatment must, therefore, be entirely ineffective – if the disease is left to overspread our bodies – what can lie ahead except sickness and death? What the human race needs is peace with God, but that is the last thing the human race is actually seeking. And, of course, so it was with the Jews in Jeremiah's day, so it has been with unending generations of human beings ever since, and so it is with our own generation. What can we expect, therefore, but what happened to the Jews in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C? If God's just judgment looming above us is our fundamental problem but we concentrate on everything else except finding peace with God, human life must inevitably continue its endless round of futile effort to save itself and must fall under that judgment once again as it has so many times in the past. And that both for the individual and the society, and that both in this world and the next. One thing is certain, no matter how the next year or the next hundred years may go, human beings are no closer to solving their problems than they were in Jeremiah's day *and for the same reason*: they will not walk in the ancient paths where the good way is to be found!

As Christians our greatest concern should be not the promise of some tech enthusiast in the Silicon Valley to transform human life. We've heard that for thousands of years and he will have no more success than the vast multitudes who have gone before him. Our concern should rather be *the increasing tendency of the Bible-believing church to heal the wound of mankind as if it were not serious*. A church that preaches salvation but does not preach repentance is once again healing the wound of mankind as if it were not serious. Preaching that does not require men and women to face the genuine evil in their hearts, the ugly selfishness of their lives; does not require them to feel the weight of the sin that dwells with them, the wickedness of their rebellion against God, the scope of their failure toward both God and man, I say, preaching that does not take the human predicament seriously, that does not make men fear the judgments of the Lord, is preaching that must inevitably steer people to the broad way, the easy way, the wide gate. And our Savior said solemnly that the broad way will take no one to heaven. The ancient paths may seem old-fashioned, impossibly out-of-date to 21<sup>st</sup> century man. But they remain the only way to peace with God. There is agony required of us who walk on the ancient paths, the agony that comes with realizing that the problem is not someone else, the problem is not a lack of this or that, the problem is not with the system or even with the world; the problem is with me and my own wicked heart, my own selfish desires, my ridiculous devotion to myself at the expense of God and everyone else. It was repentance from all this that Jeremiah was seeking among the Jews of his day and it was repentance that he never found. It was repentance God was demanding and it was a failure of repentance that he judged so severely.

Absolutely, use a computer, drive a battery-powered car if you can afford one, fly to the moon if that becomes a possibility – so long as you still have plenty of money to invest in higher things

more important to human beings. But remember, always remember this: none of that, remarkable as it may be in some respects, matters much at all in the total scheme of things. None of that is going to change the meaning of your brief life in this world. None of it is going to alter your destiny in the world to come. If you can send a text or an email at hyper-speed, well and good; but remember this: you will get to the judgment seat of God at exactly the same pace as did that man or woman who never so much as dreamed of such a thing as a cellphone. And when you stand before the Great White Throne, no computer will help you, you won't be speaking into your cell phone, or showing the Almighty your Facebook page in hopes of his becoming your friend! No, you will be standing before the Holy God – whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity and who will by no means clear the guilty – to account for the life you lived and the life you did not. And it will not be for the speed of your digital devices that you will answer but for whether or not you walked on the ancient paths, confessing your sins, repenting of them, humbling yourself before God and man, trusting in the Son of God for your peace with God, and seeking day by day to live according to his will.

None of us should be overly concerned with Steven Hawking's prognostications regarding the future of the human race. Why? Not primarily because they are so unlikely to come true, but because they all completely miss the point. There have always been people with very powerful brains who don't know much of anything about human life. The sin of man and the glory of the Redeemer. *Those* are the real issues of human life, *those* things will determine the future of the human race and every human being; always have been and always will be. Everything else is detail.

But if we concentrate on that message, on those ancient paths, will we lose our influence in the world? Oh no. We will gain influence! True repentance, true faith, and true goodness, all of which can come only from God, have always been and will always be powers in the world, life transforming powers. True enough, as our culture moves further and further from God, and as its repudiation of the ancient paths becomes even more determined, we American Christians may find ourselves as Jeremiah found himself, bearing witness to a largely uninterested generation. But we will have done our duty, we will have helped a few find the straight and narrow way, and we will have enjoyed the pleasure of walking with God and living in the truth. The ancient ways are the true ways and God will, as he always has, bear witness to their truth often enough to encourage his people. And those ancient paths will take us, as they have taken generations of the saints before us, to a new world where there is no death, crying, or pain. What if we walk the ancient paths almost alone and our numbers continue to decrease in the land? We will not be the first and not the last to have honored the Lord in difficult days!

We have no hearth – the ashes lie  
 In blackness where they brightly shone;  
 We have no home – the desert sky  
 Our covering, earth our couch alone.  
 We have no heritage – deprived  
 Of these, we ask not such on earth;  
 Our hearts are sealed; we seek in Heaven  
 For heritage, and home, and hearth.

O Salem, city of the saints,  
And holy men made perfect! We  
Pant for thy gates, our spirits faint  
Thy glorious golden streets to see;  
To mark the rapture that inspires  
The ransomed and redeemed by grace,  
To listen to the seraph's lyres  
And meet the angels face to face.