

## “One Way Out”

Many of you have been in our home. We live at 10 Honeysuckle Hill, which is at the end of a cul-de-sac. By car, there is only one way in and only one way out. On foot, a person, deer, or wild turkey could access our property through the woods *behind* our house, but by car, there is only way to get to our house.

Not long after we moved to Hampton, I heard someone call Poquoson a cul-de-sac; as he described it, there was essentially one way in and one way out.

Back in the 70s, my family would pile into our 1969 Chevrolet Impala for vacation. This was long before the days of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and even before 9-1-1 had come along, which required streets and roads to have actual names, rather than just numbered routes.

On one occasion, when returning from Cherokee, NC, my mom noticed on the map a shortcut, Highway 2 in north Georgia. We turned off the major thoroughfare onto a tar and gravel road, which eventually became a dirt road. We thought about turning around but decided that the shortcut would be worth it, so we continued. Upon reaching an unmarked fork in the road, we had to decide which way to go, so making a guess based upon a reasonably reliable sense-of-direction, we made our choice. The more we drove, the rougher the roads became. The area became more and more desolate. We saw some backpacking Boy Scouts and asked how much farther to the primary road, and they had no idea. When we had turned onto Highway 2, we had about a quarter tank of gas. As we traveled, the road became more narrow and curvy.

The more we drove, the hungrier we became. We drove for an hour and a half, wondering where we were and how we would get out. My Dad wouldn't run the air-conditioning, because he was scared we would run out of gas. He wouldn't let us roll down the windows, because my Mom was afraid a Mountain Lion or other animal might jump in on us. I remember the quarter tank of gas lasting much longer than it should have! Finally, the rutted roads began to get a bit smoother, and eventually we passed a log truck, which indicated hope was near. Within minutes, we finally viewed a house up on a hill; as my Dad got out of the car, he threw his hands up in the air and said, “Civilization!” My Dad spoke to a man on the front porch, “Where are we, and how do we get back to the main road?”

The man said, “You didn't come that way did you? You're in Tennessee. Nothing comes from that direction except logging trucks. There's only one way in and one way out.”

Our passage, while written long ago, offered the Jewish nation one way out of their bondage, and most did not realize it. The prophet addressed the Jews who had been given opportunity to return to Jerusalem at the conclusion of the Babylonian exile. For 50 years, they had lived in this foreign land, but with Cyrus now ruling, he issued an edict that the exiled people could return to their homeland. Now they were faced with a dilemma: should they stay in a place where they had established relationships and acquired possessions, for some even a bit of wealth during their lenient deportation, or should they pull up stakes and return to the home of their ancestors? You can imagine the reluctance to leave their “new familiarity” for the unknown of their former homeland. Yet the prophet, speaking on God's behalf, encouraged them to go home, to find their way back to their Promised Land, where they still were assured to have a favored future.

In that society, water became symbolic of God's presence in the world. Likewise, since bread, wine, and milk could sustain a person's life, the prophet sought to draw a correlation between what *physically* keeps a person alive *and* humanity's innate need for God. They were not thirsty for something *from* God, but instead, although they may not have realized it, they

were thirsty *for* God. God remained available, and the grace of God was free, unlike the food and drink required to keep a person alive. For those who did not seek God, they were spending their wealth for that which was not bread, and wasting their time on that which was not eternal.

God wanted to make an everlasting covenant with them, continuing the promise that had been made to King David. The covenant made to the most blessed of *all* of Israel's kings was that through him the Messiah would come. Now, the covenant was being transferred from an *individual king* to the entire people of God. But individually, each person was also responsible for their own relationship to God.

God's grace remained available, but this free grace would never be forced upon anyone, not even the favored nation of Israel. To receive it, they had to repent. They were called to forsake evil thoughts and turn from their wicked ways. "Seek the Lord" simply means to confess and repent.

Some of the hearers undoubtedly *balked* at the idea; they did not think that their behavior or thoughts *merited* changing. The prophet, well-aware of the barriers to repentance, reminded them that God's thoughts were not their thoughts, and that their ways were not God's ways. The prophet sought to underscore the great gulf between a sinful people and a holy God. Many of the exiles had found success in Babylon and had misconstrued that good fortune to be evidence of God's blessing. Some confused *their* goodness with the goodness of God. Others, due to education and status, claimed a moral and intellectual infallibility which only belongs to God. Given their place in that society, some did not understand the urgency or mandate to change, to repent. The exiled Jews were satisfied, even though they lived apart from their Promised Land. The familiarity of the deportation had lulled them into a false sense of security and misrepresented their relationship with Almighty God.

Perhaps that is the place where many find themselves today. While life moves right along, we find ourselves warm and well-fed, enjoying the delights of having our most basic physical needs met. Most of us have more than enough, and we have worked hard for what we have. We've sought to establish our place in this world by doing good, obeying the Law, and making a decent living. We recognize the generosity of God and remember to be thankful, but none of us are perfect. No matter how good we think we are, *our* thoughts are not *God's* thoughts. Regardless of the honors and awards we might receive, or the achievements we accomplish, *our* ways are not *God's* ways, because none of us are God.

The whole idea of Lent is that we are urged to confess our sins and repent, knowing that God's grace is freely available. Central to understanding today's text is to turn from evil, the call for repentance, with the full assurance that God will readily forgive. "To seek" and "call upon" the Lord refer not simply to feelings or attitudes but to acts of prayer and worship.

Each of us resides in a land of sin, and there is only one way out, which is a road built only by God. The only way that sinful humanity can be reconciled to a holy God is to seek the Lord by turning from our wicked ways. All have sinned and fallen short of God's intention; the only way back to a merciful God is to turn around. The only way out is repentance, and when we turn around, we will find God standing there waiting to receive us with open arms.

"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."