

Hey, good morning. This is unusual, but we'd like for you to take your phones out and open up the camera app, zoom in on this QR code, and then if you want, you'll have a record of the scriptures that I'm going to use today and a couple other things. And you can take notes now or later if you want. And just kind of. We're trying to encourage people to get into the word, and this is through the you version.

And we'll have more to say about it after the sermon as well, because we got a little reading plan for you to participate in. They say it's somewhere here in Indiana. It's a cemetery with a tombstone that has a little poem that goes like this. Remember, friend, as you pass by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be.

Prepare yourself and follow me. Well, I don't know if it's true or not, but somebody says. Somebody added a couple lines to that that go like this. To follow you is not my intent until I know which way you went. Makes sense to me.

This may surprise you, but there was a time in my life when I was really into rock and roll. Yeah, it's been a long time since I rock and roll, but I was into it. And my favorite band by far, was Led Zeppelin. And the highlight of my rock and roll career, or my life, was seeing Led Zeppelin in concert. Yeah, this was a big deal in Louisville's Freedom hall in April of 1977.

I was three at the time. It was Derby Eve Jam. I think it was phenomenal. They had no warm up band. They just came out and played for two straight hours.

And the encore, guess what? It was stairway to heaven, which many consider. Some of you don't even know what it is, but some consider it to be the greatest rock song of all time. And the encore lasted, like 20 something minutes. It was phenomenal.

I still remember it. But there's a couple lines in that song, stairway to heaven, that go like this. I'm not going to sing it. I'm just going to read it. There are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on.

And it's true, it's true when it comes to life and the choices we make that lead to eternal life or lead to eternal destruction. Now, if we could sit down and just talk honestly in small groups and talk with concern and compassion with each other and humility and honesty, and just say, hey, which road are you on?

Which path are you on today? Which path am I on? Am I on a path that leads to heaven, or am I on a highway to hell? Psalm one, which really is an introduction to the whole book of psalms, talks about two paths. It talks about two ways.

It talks about two roads that we can follow, and one road leads to life, and the other road leads to death and destruction. So let me ask all of us a couple of sobering questions again.

If my life ended today, what would happen? Where would I be? If your life ends today? And it could, we don't have any guarantee what would happen? Where would you be?

Would you be over here or over there? Where would you go? Psalm one talks about the two paths, the two ways, and they have final destinations. And it says, listen, here is how you stay on the right path, the path that leads to peace and joy and confidence, the one that leads to trust. And so psalm one, as Tim read with us before, says this, he says, oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or stand around with sinners or join him with mockers.

But they delight in the law of the Lord meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit in each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

But not the wicked. They're like worthless chaffs scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners have no place among the godly, for the Lord watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction. Now, you're probably going, these words seem a little harsh to our modern sensibilities, but the author is just saying, listen, listen.

There are two choices in life. There are two ways. There are two paths you can go by, and one leads to life and is so desirable, and the other does not and is not. The Hebrew word used for path is the word Derek. It's supposed to be Derek.

I don't know. Hebrew is really nasty in lots of ways. But this word, I'll just call it Derek, shows up 700 times in the Old Testament. And it just means a road, a path, literally a way, but it comes to mean figuratively, a way of life, a way of living. And in psalm one, the path that does not lead to life is characterized by a sinister progression, really.

It begins when people start listening to and then start following the advice of the worldly or the wicked, and then there's a closer association with those who are not on the path that leads to life, and then that association and influence then turns that person to where they start questioning and start really even mocking the ways of God and the people who are following them. I think the way this works today is that we allow the culture to influence us to the point that we start conforming to it. You might read romans twelve about that. And so we start hearing the world and we start listening. And through the world's influence and its pressure to conform, or else conform or you're going to be criticized or canceled.

It's real easy for me. It's real easy for us, I think, to just acquiesce and to get quiet and just kind of try to fly under the radar and kind of go with the flow. And we don't realize, I think sometimes, what's happening. And as we slowly are pulled onto this other path, we start turning and we start questioning, start questioning God and start questioning his ways. And it's not a long step until we start making fun of people who are walking that way.

They're so weird. They're out of touch. They don't understand how modern world works and how modern life works. You can see how that happens. Well, there's another path.

There's another way that leads to life. And the path and the way that leads to life is characterized by alignment with God's way, which is found in his word. And he says, people on this path flourish. They're like trees planted by water, and they flourish as they meditate on God's way night and day. They delight in God's revelation.

They enjoy his word. They look at it and see it and recognize that it's a way that leads to peace and joy and confidence. It's a beautiful thing. We've talked before that we are all being formed by something all the time. We are all being influenced by something all the time.

We're not neutral. We're taking stuff in, and it's shaping us and molding us one way or another. And so it's very important that we curate and carefully consider and just be so aware of what we're consuming, because what we consume shapes our thinking. Our thoughts become words, and our words become actions, and our actions become habits, and habits become character, and character becomes your destiny or your destination. And so our thoughts and our view of life puts us on a path, puts us on a way, puts us on a road.

God wants us to know him. He wants us to love him. He wants us to trust him. He wants us to walk in his way. And that's why there is such an emphasis in the psalms, in knowing the word of God and delighting in the word of God, enjoying the word of God.

And so the psalms in the context of real life, sometimes it's really messy. I read the psalms and go, oh, can you say that in the context of real life? They really ramp up the emphasis on knowing what God says in his word, even in the context of complaint, even in the context of confusion. I don't understand what you're doing, God. Even in the context of uncomfortable questions.

Are you asleep, God, do you care? God. Even in accusations about God, all of it's in the psalms. They all turn back to saying, we trust you. They were turned back to praise, and they all turn back to say, we really, really need to know what God is saying in his word.

Whether we understand it or even agree with it, we need to know what he's saying. There is such an emphasis on taking God's word to heart. Memorization is the key. That's why the psalms are really songs, right? That's one of the best ways to memorize things.

I still, to this day, have to sing my abcs. ABC. What? I'm trying. I got the first four, but after that, it's like, does h come before?

After? I don't know. So from a kid, we learn to sing and memorize. But there's another thing that goes on in the psalms, a mnemonic device, a way to memorize things. It's called an alphabetic acrostic.

And I think it's like ten psalms are alphabetic acrostics, meaning that the first letter of each verse is a letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. And so the best way to see this is in Hebrew, psalm 119 in the Hebrew. And you get a little introduction to Hebrew. I don't know if you can see it or not, but if you have a Bible, you know, when you get to psalm 119, it's so long, and you know that there's all these little squiggles. And then out to the side of them, there's kind of an English looking word, like there's a squiggly and it says Olaf, and then there's another squiggly and it says Beth or Baith and on down for 22 of them because there's 22 letters in the Hebrew Alphabet.

Now, what's interesting about psalm 119 is that after each letter of a headline there, there are eight verses, and you can't see it in English. But if you could see it in Hebrew, verses one through eight all begin with the Hebrew A, and then the next stanza of eight verses under B, all begin with b, all the way down to the end of the Hebrew Alphabet. So there are 22 letters, eight verses, 176 verses in psalm 119, which are an alphabetical cross. It's a beautiful, beautiful work of art. And it's clear that the author has this desire to communicate something in an eye catching and ear catching way.

Nearly every verse references, in one way or another, eight different ways, I think, scripture. And he's saying, listen, people have characterized psalm 119 as a love song. It's a love song to God, thanking him and praising him for revealing himself through his word and showing us a reliable way, a wise way to live, showing us a path. Thy word is a lamp unto our feet to guide us on the path. Modern day Jews have a celebration called Simkat Torah.

It means rejoicing in the Torah. The Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, so on and so forth. And so the Jews, they have a system of reading through those five books over the course of a year, and then once they finish, it's Simkat Torah. And so they have a celebration to celebrate the end of that reading cycle. And the climax of that celebration is when a rabbi takes a scroll and very carefully, methodically, and then ceremoniously lifts it slowly heavenward.

And the people just celebrate with exuberance and dancing. There's a story told of a group of Jews being in a concentration camp during the Second World War, and they didn't have a scroll, and they were so depressed. When it came time to celebrate Simkat Torah, they had no scroll, so how were they going to celebrate? The rabbi was with them and he was so concerned because they were slipping further and further into depression and despair. And in a moment of reflection and solitude and silence, a prayerful moment, something came to him.

And he got up and he gathered the people to him, and they were all so desperate to hear a word of encouragement. So he gathers them and he looks at them and smiles, and they're

just waiting. And he looks over at a boy and says, son, come to me. And the boy came to the rabbi, and the rabbi looked at the boy and said, son, do you know the Shema which is Deuteronomy Six? Hear, O Israel, lord is the one.

Love him with all you got. And the boy, as all jewish kids do, he knew the shaman. He says, yes, rabbi, I know the Shema, and I know many other scriptures. And the rabbi looked at him and smiled, and then he looked at the people. And then, as he would a scroll, he very carefully methodically and ceremoniously grabbed the boy and raised him heavenward.

And the people understood, and they celebrated with exuberance and dancing. The IdEA is that we are all formed by the word of God. It becomes who we are. And psalm one is urging us to embody, to enflesh the word. The word of God is meant to be taken into human hearts and then lived out in our flesh.

God accommodates us. He provides his thoughts in human words so we can understand. And then he expects us really to live out his will in our lives. And the word is always designed to become flesh. It's always supposed to be alive and living.

God wants us to live out his story in our lives, representing his presence in this world, loving him with all we've got, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Well, of course, this brings us to Jesus, the word who became flesh. You remember John one, in the beginning was the word. The word was with God. The word was God.

The word was God. And then verse 14, it says, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, which literally says tabernacled, or pitched his tent with us, meaning he moved into our neighborhood, as Eugene Peterson would say. And the word becomes flesh, so that we can see the glory of God, and we can see how he holds beautifully the tension of grace and truth. So Jesus is one who comes to show us what God has always wanted, what he still wants, and what he will always want in human lives as we embody scripture. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says, I didn't come to abolish that stuff.

I didn't come to abolish the old covenant. I came to fulfill it. I came to show you what it looks like in the flesh. Now, it's interesting. Does Jesus have anything to say about Derek?

Does he have anything to say about scripture and how important it is? We'll hold those questions for just a minute because this is, I think, important. In the third century BC, Alexander the Great was doing his thing. And as Alexander the Great's greek influence was permeating the world, people were speaking Greek. It became the common language, which meant that Jews living in various places were starting to speak Greek.

And so the jewish leaders thought it was important to translate hebrew scriptures into greek scriptures. It's called Septuagint. And so this takes place in the third century. And what's relevant for us today is that when they translate the word derek, the path, the road,

or the way, it comes over into Greek as hadas, which means the exact same thing. And the reason this is important to me is this is the word hadass.

This is the word Jesus uses to describe the choices that we have in life. He does have something to say about the way, and this is what he says. Matthew seven. You can enter God's kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for many who choose that hadass that way.

But the gateway to life is very narrow, and the road, the hadass, is difficult, and only a few ever find it. And then, shortly after saying this about the two gates that lead to two ways, Jesus shares a little parable about the wise and foolish builders. You know this. You sang it as a kid. Probably.

It's about words. It's about God's words. Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise. Like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it's built on bedrock.

But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash. So the difference between the wise and the foolish builders is knowing and practicing the words of Jesus, the difference between the blessed and the cursed. In psalm one is knowing and practicing the word of God. Of course, Jesus is the word of God, and he is the way.

He is the hadass. He says this to Thomas in John 14, I am the hadassah. I am the way. I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the father except through me.

Scripture, all of scripture, really, in one way or another, points to Jesus. And romans ten says, that's the way we develop faith. Faith comes from hearing the word. And as our faith develops, we learn to read scripture through a Jesus lens. We learn to read scripture with Jesus in mind.

We view scripture through Jesus, the one who literally embodied it and empowered by the Holy Spirit given to us at our baptism, we become more and more like Jesus. It shapes and molds us to become like him as we meditate upon scripture. And so learning about him, coming to know him through scripture, puts us on the right path. And he himself is the path, which is interesting. He is the way to life, now and forever.

Several years ago, I had a childhood friend who died of cancer, and I hadn't talked to him for literally decades. He was living in Texas at the time, and his funeral was in Texas, but his family was in Mitchell and they wanted to have a service for him in Mitchell to remember him. And so they asked me and somebody else to be a part of that. I said, sure. And so I kind of want to do research because that's what I do.

And so I found out where he went to church in Texas. And I was surprised to find that he went to a church that was led by one of my graduate school friends from Texas and a small cohort of guys, Michael. And so I called Michael, and I said, you're not going to believe this. And he goes, what? I said, yeah.

So we both know Rick. And so we chatted a little bit, and then Mike said, you won't believe what Rick did. He planned his own funeral. I said, well, tell me more. Because Rick was a little bit of a character.

He said, well, here's what happened. You know how right at the funeral hour, everything kind of tapers down and gets just totally silent? He said, we tapered down to that total silence, and it was time for the funeral to start. Everybody was just so quiet. And all of a sudden, the silence was shattered as AC DC's highway to hell starts blaring through the speakers.

What? What is going on? Well, Mike knew, so they listened to the whole song. And then my friend Mike had to get up and preach a regular funeral. And he did.

And then he sat back down, and it got totally quiet again. And then the silence was broken with the beautiful opening of Led Zeppelin's stairway to heaven. And they played the whole song, which is eight minutes and 3 seconds. I think it was Ricky's way of saying, this was the path I was on.

But I found the Derek, I found the hadass. I found the way. I found Jesus. And then on this way. And you know what?

Ricky died when he was in his fifties. He died with peace. He died with joy. He died with confidence because of the way.

Today, I just want us to think for just a little bit about which road we're on. How's your journey going? Where are you headed? If you stay on the road you're on, where are you headed? Maybe you don't know.

Maybe you're in the middle. You're kind of lost.

Maybe you need to think hard about that. We have no guarantee of the next breath, so we always need to be prepared. Someone said, the road you travel always determines your destination. Of course, Led Zeppelin says, yeah, there's always time to change the road you're on there is right now. And that's good news.

And so you can begin today to walk the way that leads to life. Most of us in the room are already on that path. We're doing okay. We may not go as fast as we used to, we may

wobble a little bit, but God's grace and his mercy and his love, it's got us. It's possible for us to walk this way because of God's love and his desire for us to be in relationship with him.

Jesus was willing to walk a path. He was willing to walk away a way of suffering, a way of death, because he knew that it was also the way to eternal life. Resurrected life. The plain truth of scripture is that Jesus loves you. He died for you.

He was raised to life not to condemn you. Why would he go through all that just to condemn you? He was raised to life to save you. And when we decide to follow him, we reenact as death, burial and resurrection in the waters of baptism, dying to sin, burying sin, rising up out of the water to live a new life. And we walk on that path.

And it's a path that's lined with peace and joy and confidence, because it's a path that's surrounded by grace and forgiveness and mercy and love and encouragement and support from one another. As we commune this morning, I want you to think about your baptism and how you began your journey with and on the way to life. Now, if you haven't been baptized, we can take care of that today.

As we commune with Christ, I want you to remember that we've all been empowered by God's spirit to walk his way. We can flourish. We can produce wonderful fruit even in a dry and weary land. So let me pray. Father, thank you for making it clear that there is a way.

There's only one way, really to walk. And we get confused, we get pulled on to different paths, and we wander around. But we know you still love us. But help us today to think clearly about where we are and where we're headed and who we're taking with us as we go. And we just thank you that Jesus is the way.

We thank you that he was willing to move into our neighborhood to show us how to live, show us how to die and how to live again. We thank you that you've invited us into your story. Thank you that we can trust you and love you and become your children. Thank you for baptism, which beautifully reenacts the gospel story. So as we take this bread and drink this cup this morning, bring to mind the beautiful things that you want us to think about in Jesus name.

Amen.

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