

(How to Get Out of a Religious Rut): The Church in the Rut

by A.W. Tozer

The sermon emphasizes the importance of change and examination in overcoming spiritual stagnation and getting out of a religious rut.

Duration: 36:31

Scripture: Deuteronomy 1:6, Matthew 28:18, Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 10:10-12, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Religious Rut"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher uses the analogy of a radio signal fading out as one travels away from the city to illustrate how the passing of time can dull a person's religious feelings. He emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord with all authority in heaven and earth. The preacher urges listeners to not wait for time but to come to the remedy of the precious blood of Jesus that cleanses from all sins and the Holy Spirit who gives life. He warns against being discouraged and encourages taking action to shake oneself out of a spiritual rut. The preacher also highlights how society conditions people to think sinfully and emphasizes the need to resist this influence.

Transcript

Moreover, brethren, I would not have that, not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea, did all eat the same spiritual meat, and did all drink the same spiritual drink, for they drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. These things were our example to the intent.

We should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted, neither the idolaters, as were some of them, as it is written, and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. I'll get rid of that frog, and then we'll go ahead. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.

Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of the serpent. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. All these things happened unto them for example, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.' Now, that gives us New Testament authority for using the Old Testament to point up New Testament truth. And I have been preaching from this text in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 1.6. The Lord our God spake unto us in Horeb, saying, Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount, and remember, these things were written for our admonition. God said to Israel, Turn you and take your journey, and go to the mount of the Amorites, and to all the places, and I thereunto, in the plain, and in the hills, and in the vale, and south, and by the seaside, to the land of the Canaanites, and to Lebanon, and the great river Euphrates.

I have set the land before you. Go in and possess the land, which the Lord swore unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them, and to their seed after them. But they were going round and round about that mount.

He said, You have been here long enough in this place. Get out of here and begin to accept or possess that which I have made available to you and which belongs to you. That's the background.

I say that Israel is in a rut here. Israel as a nation did about everything that we as individuals do, and that we as churches. That's why the Old Testament history was written.

And we'd better learn from them and stay out or get out of the difficulties they found themselves in. Now, about this man in the religious rut. Churches get in ruts only because individuals get in ruts.

It's impossible that this church should do anything that individuals don't do. It's impossible that we should make any progress except as it's made by individuals. It's impossible there should be any regress unless individual Christians go backward.

And so we'll think about that individual man who finds himself in a religious rut. He'll find a number of things about himself. He'll find that he's getting older and not getting any holier.

So time is his enemy and not his friend. And the time that he trusted and looked to is betraying him. For he said very often to himself, the passing of time will help me.

I know some good old Saints, and therefore as I get older I'll get holier and better. Time will help me and purify me and revive me. He said that year before last.

But it wasn't help any last year. Time betrayed him. It wasn't any better last year than he had been the year before.

Time let him down. But he said last year, next year surely I'll make some progress, I'll get out of this rut, I'll go forward with God. That would have been this year.

But this year is over to September 2nd, and he isn't any further along than he was last year or the year before. But this year he may be saying, time is my friend, time will help me, and I'm getting older, and next year I'll make progress. But I say to you that religion, the man in the rut of religion, the religious rut, is getting older, but he's not getting any holier.

And time that he trusted to be his friend is betraying him and proving to be his enemy. And time is doing another thing to him, it's increasing his indifference to spiritual things. The signal that God used to be able to get through to him easily is now getting fainter and fading away.

Once in a while on good days you can still hear it. You know how it is when you travel away from a city like Toronto, you have your radio on, you want to get the news or find out something, or listen to music, maybe if it's FM, decent music, and you want to listen to it. And as you move away, the station gets fainter.

The signal is still reasonably clear, but it's fainter. And then you get into a pocket where you don't hear it at all. And you say to yourself, to someone with you, well, that station is faded out, whatever your station is.

And then suddenly it comes on again, and you say, well, we're hearing it again, but it's very faint. But when you get far enough away from the city, you don't hear it at all. And that's exactly what the man in the rut finds out about himself.

He finds out that the passing of time tends to dull his religious feelings, and the signal that used to be quite clear is fading out. Then he worries a little, and he says, now this signal is gone, I'll have to do something. Then suddenly it comes on again, and he hears it a little, and he says, oh, it's not so bad after all.

But he's just in a favorable pocket. Some new preachers come to town or something, and he thinks he's hearing the voice again, and he is a little bit. But it isn't very long until he's out of the wavelength where he can't hear it anymore.

And so time has increased his indifference to spiritual things and dulled his religious feelings, and it's making it harder all the time for him to change. Now, change is one of the ingredients of Christianity. I don't mean that it's there theologically, but if a man couldn't change, then the gospel would be absolutely meaningless.

If the Lord would come and say, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, repent and believe, and you couldn't repent and believe, the gospel would be meaningless. So I say the fact that a man can change is the only hope the man has. For if he couldn't change, there would be no reason to preach to him that he must change.

And yet we are sent to preach that men should change, which is repent. They should turn from darkness to light. They should turn from idols to God.

They should change. This, I say, is absolutely necessary. It's vitally needed in the spiritual life.

But this man who is in the rut, who is in the circular grave, finds that it's getting harder for him to change. He used to have spells when he was emotionally moved and his will got over on the side of God, and he really meant to make a good Christian out of himself by the grace of God. But those times are getting fewer.

Up from Cape Canaveral a week or so ago, they sent a rocket toward Venus, Mariner II. Mariner went up all right and took off and pulled away from the gravitational drag of the earth and got out into free space, worked weightless, nothing to hold it back, nothing to draw it in any direction. All it had to do was just go ahead.

But the scientists figured that the way it's going now, when in December it arrives in the general area of Venus, it will be a third of a million miles away from Venus. And they want to get it within 10,000 miles, 10,000 miles in space just next door. So they want to get it within 10,000 miles of Venus so that it will tell them certain things they want to know about Venus and all the rest.

Here's what they're going to do, either today or tomorrow, and I wasn't certain whether it was today or tomorrow, but it's in a matter of hours now. It either has been done or will be in a matter of hours. They're going to activate a little motor from the earth by remote control, they're going to activate a little motor that will push the nose of that thing a little bit to a right or left or up or down, whichever it is, there's no up or down up there, so that the change will bring it within 10,000 miles of Venus in December, not 300,000 miles.

Now, my friends, this, say the scientists, this change must be made within hours now. It couldn't be made too soon, but if they wait, there's no use to make it. It's too late.

They've reached the point of no return, and the thing will simply go off into space and be what they call, that terrible word they call now, space garbage. Have you heard that word? I heard on the air the other day that they had found some space garbage up there somewhere. The garbage man hadn't cleaned up the mess.

They thought the Russians did it. Mostly it's Americans that are to blame, but this time the Russians got it. They said, there's space garbage, and this thing would simply be space garbage if they don't make that change at the point of no departure, at the only time that they can be saved from that point of no departure.

You can't wait and say, Oh, well, we'll do it next Thanksgiving day, or we'll do it when they come home from our vacation. No, you'll either do it in the next hour or you won't do it at all. And that's the way it is with the man in the rut.

There comes a time, and I don't claim to know where it is, there comes a time when he must make his change, and if he doesn't make it, he'll not make it at all. And as time goes by, it gets harder all the time for him to make it. And time is stealing away the day of his opportunity to make it.

He began with a given number of days, and he's already used up so many days, but he doesn't know how many. And he doesn't know how many he has left because he doesn't know how many that he had to start with. He doesn't know how many were granted to him to start with, and so while he could count the number of days he's been on earth, he doesn't know how that stacks up relative to the number that were accorded to him, so he doesn't know where he is.

He only knows that the days are doing what the poet said about the leaves. The leaves of life keep falling one by one. There stands a beautiful sugar maple in front of our house up on Old Orchard Grove.

It's one of the greenest, deepest trees we've ever seen, almost as beautiful as our old maples back in Pennsylvania. Lovely, lovely trees, standing there beautiful. And it hangs to its leaves a long time.

Then along about the latter part of October, the first of November, we notice some leaves missing. And I say to myself, Oh, well, look, it's a mass of leaves. It's a bushing mass of green leaves.

I don't need to worry. Then the next day I say, Well, there aren't as many leaves. And I notice some branches beginning to show.

And before the snow flies, there isn't a leaf left. The leaves of life keep falling one by one. And the man in the rut never knows when the last leaf has fallen for him.

Now, why is the man in the rut? I say as a man, I'm not going to talk to the Church, because there's nothing so comfortable as to have a preacher lamb-basket Church, and then you say to yourself, That doesn't mean me, he means the Church. I mean you, you're the Church. Why is the man in the rut? Well, there are four possibilities.

He may never have been cruelly converted at all, and I think that that's one of our great problems now. We have a dozen ways of getting people into the kingdom of God now, and the Lord said there was only one, and we have a dozen. They leak in and ooze in and come in by osmosis and get in by marriage and just get in about any different kind of way.

But there's only one way, and when a man finds that after being in the Church for years he's not making much progress, but he's about where he was, he ought to examine himself and wonder whether maybe he's not been cruelly converted at all. Which means radical repentance, a changed life, conscious forgiveness of sin, and a spiritual rebirth. That's all included in what we call converted, though theologically it isn't, but for popular use as I'm using it now, it is.

The truly, solemnly converted man, as the old Methodist said, he's had a radical repentance which eventuated in a changed life, then there came a consciousness of forgiveness of sin and a spiritual rebirth. The man in the rut may never have had that at all. Or he may have been abandoned to the devil as a severe disciplinary measure to keep him out of hell.

Let me read to you, 1 Corinthians 5, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, said the Holy Apostle, when you are gathered together with my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one, a certain one, unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Then in 1 Corinthians 12, or 11, the man of God says, Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and I don't think we know whether we mean physically or spiritually, but I would say physically here. And many sleep. If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

But when we are judged, we wait for God's judgment, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. So this man in the circular grave, who is getting older without getting holier, may have been abandoned to the devil because of one of two things. Some fleshly sin, or in 1 Corinthians 5, it was a fleshly sin, the sin of a man who married his mother-in-law, at least it was incest, or because of grave irreverence at the communion table.

I tell you, my friends, we Protestants are altogether too much inclined to take things for granted. We laugh at those on the other side of the ecclesiastical fence because they bow and scrape and kowtow in the presence in the Church, but we lack reverence, not because we are free in the gospel, but because God is absent and we have no sense of his presence. We sometimes come to the communion table in a moral and spiritual state totally unfitting us for receiving of the communion, and yet we take it.

Paul said about such that they are being judged of God, or will be judged of God, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus, they might not be condemned with the world. This man in the rut, it's almost certain that sin is the cause of his circular grave, since only sin offends God, and sin is extremely deceitful. It can be present doing its deadly work, and we don't know it.

The man not be aware of it at all until it's called to his attention. It's of several kinds, as you know. There is the sin of omission, which is an act left undone that should have been done.

There is the sin of commission, which is an act displeasing to God and to the Holy Ghost. There is the sin of the flesh, which the world may approve, even the churches and the pastors may permit it. It's astonishing what preachers will joke about with their congregations and laugh off and put up with.

So maybe the pastors permit it, laugh it off at least, and say, Oh, well, you can't be too holy, you can't be angelic in this world. But the Holy Spirit is grieved by it, nevertheless. The Holy Ghost is grieved by it.

So the man moves around his circular grave, and he's not hearing the voice much anymore. He used to hear it, but he's not hearing it anymore. He's not hearing it.

He's not hearing it. He's not talk too much. The man moves around his circular grave.

There may be sins of the mind. Society. Whenever I use the word society in a sermon, I want you to know what I mean.

As a rule, I don't mean the Social 400. That we call high society. I'm not referring to high society.

So unless I put the adjective of high on it, when I use the word society, I mean Adam's race. Adam's fallen race, organized variously into what we call cultures, groups, nations, tribes. Society.

Society is organized to condition our minds to think sinfully and to think in unbelief and to think carnally and to think in a manner displeasing to God. We're taught it in school, it gets into our newspapers, it's on television, it's on the radio. Our neighbors are dropped in for a cup of tea, drops a little word.

Not bad, but it's all part of the conditioning process of society. Society, says a great man, is in a conspiracy to make every man like every other man. But what he didn't say was that society is in a conspiracy to make every man ungodly in his thinking.

By ungodly, I don't mean that he likes pornographic pictures. By that, I do not mean that he stands in the corner of the street on a windy day and watches the ladies go by. By that, I do not mean that he thinks and dreams at night of pornography.

Not that, because that's only one facet of wrongdoing. It's only one facet of sin. It's such a thing as ambition and the love of money.

And over-appreciation of earthly things, such as our possessions, and jealousy and envy. All of these things. They all fit in and make a web, and society is busy teaching us and conditioning our minds, I say, to think sinfully.

And it begins in the cradle. My brother, to think God's thoughts requires much prayer. If you don't pray much, you're not thinking God's thoughts.

If you don't read your Bible much and often and reverently, you're not thinking God's thoughts. Those thoughts you are having, and your head buzzes with them all day long and into the night, those thoughts you are having are earthly thoughts, they are Adamic thoughts, they are the thoughts of the fallen race, they are the thoughts of a lost society, let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. There's got to be a lot of meditation, reading a page out of the book all fixed up for you by somebody else and what's

supposed to bless you, and then running off, that won't do.

It's better than nothing, I suppose, but it's a lot worse than something. So we ought to get our Bible, and we ought to learn to live in it, get one with print big enough to read so it won't punish your eyes, look around until you find a good one, and then learn to love it. Begin with 1 John, or I mean the gospel according to John, and read the psalm.

Isaiah is another great book to help and lift you, and when you feel you want to do it and can, go on into Romans and Hebrews and the deeper theological books, but get into the Bible, and don't just read the little passages that you like, but in the course of a year or two years, see that you've read it clear through, because your thoughts, my brother, will someday come up before God's judgment. We are responsible for our permitted thoughts. They make of our mind a temple, or they make of our mind a stable.

They make of our mind a temple where God can dwell with pleasure. Or they make of our mind a temple where Christ in anger ties a rope and drives the cattle out. It's all up to us.

What should we then do? I say, examine yourself. If you find yourself in that awful circular grave, and you haven't made any spiritual progress, and you're not making any, and you find that the passing of time upon which you would lean so heavily has become a broken reed, and time isn't helping you at all, then I recommend you examine your life. Even the philosopher Socrates said, a nonexamined life isn't worth living.

If a common philosopher could think of that, how much more we Christians ought to listen to the Holy Ghost when he says, examine yourself. For an unexamined Christian life is like an untended garden. Let your garden go untended for a full month.

You'll not have roses and dahlias and tomatoes. You'll have weeds. An unexamined Christian life is like an unkept house.

Lock your house up as tight as you will, and leave it for a long enough time when you come back, you won't believe the dirt that got in it from somewhere. An unkept house is like an unexamined life. An unexamined Christian is like an untaught child.

A child that isn't taught, that grows up like crops he just grewed, that child will be a little savage. It takes examination, teaching, instruction, discipline, caring and tending and weeding and harrowing and cultivating to keep the life right. I don't want to leave you on a low note once more, I tell you, that what I am doing is trying to wake you, but I am certainly not trying to discourage you, because there isn't any reason in the world for your being discouraged.

Suppose that there was an elixir of life that could cure any disease any man could have, and it was down here at the corner of Bloor and Young, and you could have it for a nickel a bottle. It was the magic elixir of life that would make anybody healthy. Then suppose that I found an old fellow sitting on a bench over here, and I went and sat down beside him.

I noticed by looking at him, high blood pressure could tell it by the veins that stand out on his forehead. Another thing is that I'm no doctor at all, but having lived around a while I can see what's wrong with people sometimes. And I began to try to tell him, you have lived long enough on this bench, get up, there's a better place for you.

He begins to resist me. Then I have to preach a whole series of sermons to him to get him to know how sick he is, when just down the street here a little way is the cure for what's wrong with him. And that's precisely where we are in our churches.

You have to work on people for weeks to get them to see that they are in a rut. And it would be a cruel thing to do if there wasn't a remedy. But there's a remedy.

Here is the elixir. If we say that we have fellowship with God and walk in darkness, we lie and do not speak truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.

In the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, there we are arguing with the old fellow, you're sick, Grandpa, I'm not sick. Get out of here, young fellow.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And I wonder if I'm the only preacher or teacher in the world that ever noticed this, for I have never heard it preached, I have never heard it in a Bible class, I have never seen it in print, and I have never come across it anywhere, that the justice of God is on the side of the confessing sinner.

Because Jesus Christ died and because he was God and because he was man, his atonement was so absolutely and fully efficacious. And because he died that just for the unjust, he gave us a plenitude of atonement so full and satisfying to God that even justice comes over on the side of the sinner. If we confess our sins, he is faithful, that's good, but he is even just, righteous, to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Do you hear that? All of the attributes of God are on the side of the man who confesses his sin and turns and runs to the feet of Jesus. Now, little children, these things write under you that you sin not, but if any man sins, even advocate with the Father Jesus Christ, the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins, not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. So there we have it.

There is the elixir, there is the cure. That's only one little passage, of course. There are all over the New Testament.

The blood is shed for us. God pardons and forgives for Christ's sake. The Holy Ghost is here to take the things of Christ and make them real unto us, just as the stars in their courses fought for Deborah against Cicero.

So all of the stars in heaven and above them, the winds that blow on the earth, are in favor of the child of God when he comes to the Savior and wants to get right. There is nothing, not the devil himself can hinder him, nothing can hinder him. For Christ Jesus is a sovereign Lord, and all power is given unto him, that is, all authority in heaven and in earth.

So there is a remedy, thank God there is a remedy. How much longer am I going to have to sit and argue with that man on the bench and say, Dad, you're in an awful state? And they say, That was good preaching, wasn't it? And then goes on his way. That's not the point, brother.

The point is, how soon are we going to take the remedy? How soon are we coming to the precious blood that defends us from all sin, and to the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, which with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified? How soon are we going to shake ourselves out of this rut? Don't wait for

time. Time will be your enemy. The signal will get weaker, and your ability to change will get less, and your interest will become less keen.

Do something, while you can. Remember, if they don't activate that little motor at the right time, it will go where they can't activate it at all, and so will the man. Dear Heavenly Father, we pray this night, O Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, thy Son, we bring our petition.

Father, we apologize to thee this night for the way we've been living. We're sorry for carelessness and that insidious ease in Zion that cares nothing for the troubles of Jacob. O God, we pray this evening that thou wilt burn truth home.

We dare to ask, and we do ask, don't let anybody escape the arrows of the Almighty. Don't let anybody escape the net of the divine fish. We beseech thee that thou wilt so move upon us that one after the other, board members and Sunday school teachers, people that have a reputation for being holy, all of us together will see how desperately we need a visitation from thee, and how we're hindering it by our rut, thinking in the rut, praying in the rut, expecting in the rut, living in the rut.

O Lord, we thank thee there is a way out. The precious blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin, and for the blood cleanses the Holy Ghost anoints. So we pray this night, there might be some, even one, that will say, I am the man, I am the man, and will do something about it.

And we believe that if we repent of the rut, thou wilt repent of the rut that thou art leaving us in, and will bring us out to a wealthy place. We ask this in Christ.

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