



Candlewood Church



Sacred Pathways

August 30, 2026

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BIG IDEA – One path with many different encounters with Christ.

Scripture Focus – I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But **I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.** Philippians 3:12

Blurb:

When you are new to faith, it can feel like **everyone else got a syllabus you never received.** As you mature, it can feel like the **completed syllabus was so structured that it leaves you sensing there's more,** but you don't know where to find it. This week we ask what it looks like to walk with Jesus as a sacred pathway rather than a systematic checklist; a road that leads to a deeper, more restful way of faith.

I love summer, I love the month of August because it has always reminded me of the month before the rush of school starting, and most of the country saying "alright, it's time to get back to work."

REVIEW

Pastor Larry kicked off our series called "**REST.**" He said this,

"We often search for rest in vacations, entertainment, hobbies, or simply a day off. While those things may refresh the body, they cannot satisfy the soul. Jesus offers something greater than a break from work - He offers rest in Himself. When life becomes overwhelming, we must intentionally refocus on The One who invites us to rest." **Resting in God's love, provision, timing & control.**

Then we talked about Holy Habits, Rhythms of less stuff and this week we'll peek into Sacred Pathways.

STORY: The Ache

Six years ago, none of us knew what was about to happen.

We all experienced a little thing called a “global pandemic.”

We say "the pandemic" like it was one thing, one event, **but really it was a chain reaction of events.**

It started with fear; a virus we couldn't see, spreading through a world we didn't understand yet. **Fear turned to panic fast;** you remember the empty shelves, don't you? **Toilet paper became a currency.** That's not a joke about the world overreacting; that's just what fear does when it has nowhere else to go. It grabs.

Panic turned to hoarding.

Hoarding turned to something worse: learned helplessness. Week after week of "just two more weeks," until **we all just stopped trying to make sense of it and went numb.** And for a massive amount of people, that **numbness eventually settled into apathy;** not peace, just checking out.

Here's what made this one different for us than for the generations that came after us. **Our grandparents, and even our parents, had something we didn't: a story passed down. Grandma remembered the Depression. Grandpa remembered rationing.** It made my grandma, the one with the whiskey decanter ☺, **reuse paper towels by hanging them to dry on the cupboard doors above the sink.** It made my grandpa **rinse and reuse aluminum foil, which he piled up in the lower oven.** Even if they never called it a "crisis," **their kids grew up hearing what it was like to go without, to wait in lines, to not know if there'd be enough.** That story gave that generation a category, a place to put fear when it showed up. And the memory that they **survived the Great Depression.**

My generation didn't have that. You'd have to go back roughly a hundred years, to the **1918 flu and the years around it, to find a global disruption at that scale.** That's why I've started reflecting about the last six years and **seeing it as a hundred-year crisis.**

We didn't inherit a story for this one. **We had to write it all on our own in real time, with no idea how it would end.**

But here's the part I don't want us to skip past, because it's easy to forget now: something good snuck in the back door of all that fear.

Some of us had our best dinners in years around that dining room table, **because there was nowhere else to be.** Some of us rediscovered a rhythm of rest you didn't know you'd lost, **not because we chose it, but because the whole world stopped long enough to let us find it.**

And then the last two years happened. And what did we do with all that we learned?

We ran back. Full calendars, full inboxes, full speed; like we were trying to **make up for lost time, or trying to forget what the stillness had shown us.**

We cranked up the very pace and systems that had exhausted us in the first place, like our first move after finally catching our breath was to go sprint again.

We booked and overbooked our lives, our schedules and re-entered into the lie that busyness is next to godliness!

But not everybody ran back. And I want to be careful how I say this, because I'm not trying to make any one generation the hero of this story. But **those who study these kinds of cultural shifts are noticing something in the generation coming up behind us.** It's not a boom in church attendance, and it's not some tidy return to how things used to be. **What they're finding is quieter than that: a real hunger for meaning, showing up in unexpected places. Journaling. Long walks. Silence. Slower, older forms of practice that don't move at algorithm speed- posting less. OR, at least posting more about beautiful moments, rather than socially influenced stunts.**

Some of that searching still gets hijacked by A.I. driven algorithms (called A.I. chatbots). "Nearly three in four teens have now tried an AI companion, and about one in three say it feels as satisfying as a real friendship."

Plenty of people, young and old, have **gotten trapped in fake versions of connection; for the young it is conversation, for the old it's just scams** just to get their money or their identity.

Both just deepens, either the loneliness or the distrust they were trying to escape. But some of it is real.

I would like to believe that there are people quietly deciding that old, slow, and solid might actually be more sustainable than fast, new, and loud.

I am all for embracing the future and even the change that it brings. But, I do not ever want the pace of that change to replace my walk with Jesus.

That's exactly where I want us to land this morning, because that instinct isn't naive; it's ancient.

Long ago, before any of us had a pandemic to recover from, God said something through the prophet Jeremiah that sounds like it was written for this exact moment in history:

God's Word may seem old, but its more than just relevant, it is ETERNAL!

Thus says the LORD: "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. Jeremiah 6:16 ESV

Yet here is the human condition – the resistance to God's truth and His way. It's shockingly still true today.

"But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

Oh, we know that it is true and that it works... but I still choose to do things **my way**.

God doesn't say the ancient paths are quaint, or nostalgic, or nice for people who like that sort of thing.

God says his path, his way leads somewhere specific: rest for your souls.

The earliest Christians weren't called a denomination or a doctrine.

THE WAY

- Luke describes the early church being called simply "**the Way**" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14). **Discipleship was always a path to walk, not just a course to finish.**
- **Saul threatening Jesus followers...** "He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of **any followers of the Way** he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains. **Acts 9:2 NLT**
- **Opposed to Paul speaking...** "But some became stubborn, rejecting his message and publicly speaking **against the Way**. So Paul left the synagogue and took the believers with him. Then he held daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus." **Acts 19:9 NLT**
- **A riot breaks out...** "About that time, serious trouble developed in Ephesus **concerning the Way.**" **Acts 19:23 NLT**
- **Paul speaking...** "But I admit that **I follow the Way**, which they call a cult. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the prophets. **Acts 24:14 NLT**

STOP AND LISTEN TO THE WORD OF GOD.

And I want to suggest to you this morning that the sacred, contemplative, and solid practices we're about to talk about aren't just restful. They're protective.

They may be the very thing standing between you and racing headlong back into the pace and the systems that hollowed you out the first time.

Observation #1: The Danger — Galatians 3:1-3 and Revelation 2:4-5

Paul was serious about **not going back to the law** in order to move forward in faith and grace.

Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about

Christ. How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? Galatians 3:1-3 NLT

The path forward to perfection is not through keeping the law. Walking in the Spirit, which Paul loves to highlight the Greek word, “**peripateo**” is way of life, a dynamic, thriving, **continuous pattern of conduct that flows from one’s relationship with God.**

Retreating to the highly structured and regulated adherence to the law **would only lead to what Paul wrote about in Romans – DEATH.** The law was the teacher that said, this is perfection that you will always struggle to fulfill yet never be able to obtain!

If it were possible to be perfect and live perfect, overcoming sin on our own, there would not be a necessity of the Savior – Jesus Christ, taking on our sin and dying in our place.

The danger is trying to be perfect by our own effort! It’s not only an exercise of futility (as Paul said), but also an exercise of failure.

John, the revelator, exposes the reality of the Church in Ephesus,

“I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting. **Revelation 2:2-3 NLT**

Jesus commended the hard work and stellar performance of suffering and endurance. But then Jesus says,

“But I have this complaint against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.” **Revelation 2:4-5 NLT.**

That’s the same sense of the ache we talked about when we survived **the pandemic!**

Jesus, recognizing the church has done a good thing following the structure and safety of sound doctrine, but it **becomes a trap when it replaces relationship; a walk and way of life** with Jesus **and** one another!

Ephesus passed every theological test and still heard “you have left your first love.”

I believe Jesus did remove their lampstand – their witness within their city. **Even today, there is not one viable church in the modern city of Ephesus** with a population of only 36,000 people. It once had over 250,000 residents and considered to be one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire.

Observation #2: The Struggle is real — Philippians 3:12–14

After clearly establishing his spiritual pedigree as an Apostle of Jesus and his failures to recognize God, Paul calls his past accomplishments garbage compared to what Jesus has done.

Paul tells the churches in Philippi, “I **no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law**; rather, I **become righteous through faith in Christ**. For **God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith**.” Philippians 3:9 NLT

Even Paul, the most theologically trained apostle, **refuses to claim he’s arrived**.

Pressing on IS the pathway, not a failure to complete it.

PRESS TO POSSESS!

I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us. Philippians 3:12-14 NLT.

If is not the law, or it is not perfectly good things we believe “makes us” Christians or helps us be followers of The Way, what is it?

Observation #3: Invitation to Rest — Matthew 11:28–30, Psalm 62:1

Jesus wants our journey to be restful even amidst weariness and heavy burdens.

Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.” Matthew 11:28-30 NLT

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. Psalm 62:1 ESV

Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, and Catholic writer in 1600’s. “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

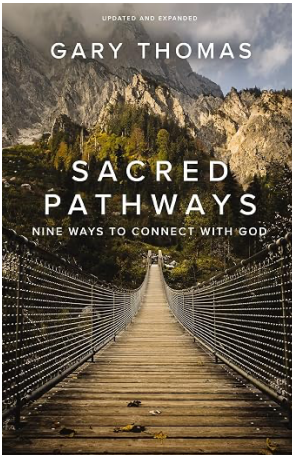


Dig Deeper – How we spend our trips around the sun

Time spent in 1920 compared to 2026 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYzzGtlG-zU>



There is only one path, one way to God through Jesus Christ. But there are many different encounters and expressions of what it looks like to walk with Christ.



[Gary Thomas' Sacred Pathways - Nine Ways to Connect with God](#)

Gary's book is a restful journey away from the frustration of a one-size-fits-all spirituality and discovering a path of worship that allows you to be you.

We can recognize that all of us engage with God differently. It's about tailoring disciplines to better fit our individual personality. Whether we are introverted or intellectual individuals, or we are extroverted and action-oriented individuals we can find ourselves engaging with the presence of God intentionally fitting the way we actually go through life.

The idea is to quit trying to conform into someone else's shoes as well as trying to make someone else mimic our pace and place to worship God. Maybe you'll find your favorite in Gary's list. I certainly have found mine!

I love this quote by Gary...

"There is great freedom in how we can meet with and enjoy God. This is by His design and according to His good pleasure."

If you are an assessment kind of person you might enjoy [Gary's Spiritual Pathways Assessment](#). You can also watch this [quick video](#) for more information.

Gary Thomas – Sacred Pathways.

- **Naturalists:** loving God in nature and the outdoors.
- **Sensates:** loving God with the senses (smells, sounds, visuals, textures, and tastes).
- **Traditionalists:** loving God through ritual, symbolism, and liturgy.
- **Ascetics:** loving God in solitude and self-denial.
- **Activists:** loving God by fighting injustice.
- **Caregivers:** loving God by caring for those in need.
- **Enthusiasts:** loving God with music, dance, and celebration.
- **Contemplatives:** loving God through quiet adoration.
- **Intellectuals:** loving God with the mind.

No single temperament is superior. We need to quit comparing or moralizing preferences; it is not helpful to others.

REFLECTION

In the Sacred Pathways, where do I most naturally sense God's nearness — and where have I maybe judged someone else for not getting there the same way I do?

APPLICATION

- Download the Dig Deeper notes.
 - Checkout the Nine Sacred Pathways (book, list, video or assessment)
 - Prayerfully choose which capture your passion to be with Jesus, to continue to walk, abiding in His presence.
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SCRIPTURES

Jeremiah 6:16 ESV ON SCREEN

Thus says the LORD: "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.

Acts 9:2 NLT

He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of **any followers of the Way** he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

Acts 19:9 NLT

But some became stubborn, rejecting his message and publicly speaking **against the Way**. So Paul left the synagogue and took the believers with him. Then he held daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

Acts 19:23 NLT

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Acts 24:14 NLT

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Galatians 3:1-3 NLT ON SCREEN

Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?

Revelation 2:2-3 NLT **ON SCREEN**

I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

Revelation 2:4-5 NLT **ON SCREEN**

But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.

Philippians 3:9 NLT **ON SCREEN**

Paul tells the churches in Philippi, "I **no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law**; rather, I **become righteous through faith in Christ**. For **God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith**."

Matthew 11:28-30 NLT **ON SCREEN**

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

Psalms 62:1 ESV **ON SCREEN**

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.



DIG DEEPER NOTES



A.I. Companionship

- **72% of teens have used an AI companion** (apps like Character.AI, Replika) at least once; over half use them multiple times a month
- **About 1 in 3 teens have used an AI companion for social interaction, including romantic interaction and emotional support**
- **About 1 in 3 say conversations with an AI companion feel as satisfying**, or more satisfying, than conversations with real-life friends
- The reassuring counterweight: **80% still say they prefer real friendships over AI ones, and half of teens say they distrust AI's advice.**

Pew Research Center (Dec 2025 and Feb 2026 reports, "Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots" and "How Teens Use and View AI"):

- 64% of teens use AI chatbots at all; ChatGPT dominates at 59% (more than double any competitor)
- About 30% use a chatbot daily, 16% several times a day or almost constantly

- But when Pew specifically asked about relational use: only 16% use a chatbot "to have casual conversations" and just 12% for "emotional support or advice" — a notably smaller slice than Common Sense Media's numbers

Common Sense Media asked specifically about AI *companion* apps, which are built for relationship-style interaction; **Pew** asked about general chatbot use (mostly ChatGPT), where emotional use is more incidental.

- [Nearly 3 in 4 Teens Have Used AI Companions, New National Survey Finds — Common Sense Media](#)
 - [Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots 2025 — Pew Research Center](#)
 - [How Teens Use and View AI — Pew Research Center](#)
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What's the latest on Next Gen faith?

Gen Z / faith: the widely-reported UK "Quiet Revival" stat (Bible Society/YouGov: 18-24 monthly attendance 4%→16%) is disputed by the British Social Attitudes Survey (probability-sampled), which shows Gen Z churchgoing still declining and still lowest of any generation. Avoid citing the Quiet Revival number as settled fact.

- Better-supported U.S. framing (Pew Research, Oct 2025 + Hartford Institute): only 57% of 18-30-year-olds identify with a religion (vs. 80% of 61-70-year-olds), but Gen Z is turning to journaling, art, music, nature, and online community to "find meaning and purpose" individually rather than through institutions. This is the framing used in the drafted script.
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New Testament's use of *peripateó*.

Used ninety-six times in the New Testament, the verb translated "walk" describes **both literal movement and the entire manner of life**. Whether narrating Christ's mastery over creation or urging believers toward holiness, Scripture employs the word to present a **dynamic, continuous pattern of conduct that flows from one's relationship with God**.



The Nine Sacred Pathways (Gary Thomas)

Each pathway is a temperament through which people most naturally sense God's presence; most people find themselves living mainly in one or two, with a blend of others in the background.

1. Naturalist — "Let me be outdoors"

Meets God most naturally in creation rather than in a classroom or sanctuary. Spiritual truth clicks for this person on a trail, by water, under open sky.

Looks like: Reading Scripture outside; praying on a walk or a hike; sensing God's peace and provision through the created world rather than through a lesson about it.

Biblical echoes: Psalm 23's still waters and green pastures; Jesus withdrawing to lonely places and mountains to pray; the burning bush at Horeb; the garden of Eden as the first meeting place between God and people.

Watch for: Drifting toward treating creation itself as sacred rather than as a witness pointing to its Maker; avoiding the harder, more relational parts of corporate faith because solitude outdoors feels more spiritually "real."

2. Sensate — "Let me experience"

Worships with the whole body — sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Drawn to beauty, art, music, and atmosphere as doorways into God's presence.

Looks like: Being moved by a great hymn or a well-built sanctuary; lighting a candle; noticing incense, art, or architecture as an act of worship, not a distraction from it.

Biblical echoes: The tabernacle and temple's deliberate sensory richness — gold, color, incense, craftsmanship; Ezekiel's and John's vivid, sense-saturated visions of God's throne room.

Watch for: Mistaking the emotional lift of beauty for an actual encounter with God; needing the "production value" to be high before faith feels real.

3. Traditionalist — "Let me remember"

Connects to God through ritual, symbol, sacrament, and the rhythm of the church calendar. Finds security and depth in repetition rather than novelty.

Looks like: Observing Advent, Lent, Good Friday, and Easter with intention; liturgical prayer; the same daily prayer or devotional pattern, kept faithfully for years.

Biblical echoes: Israel's feasts and Passover, given by God specifically as memory-keeping rituals; the earliest church's quick adoption of set patterns for the Lord's Supper and prayer.

Watch for: Gary Thomas's own warning line for this one — "serving God without knowing God" — going through the motions without the heart engaged; judging those who worship less formally.

4. Ascetic — "Let me be alone"

Meets God in solitude, silence, and simplicity. Distraction, noise, and clutter (physical or spiritual) feel like real obstacles to this person's faith.

Looks like: Extended solitude; fasting; simple living; a retreat day; rising early specifically to be alone before God; cutting out what isn't necessary.

Biblical echoes: John the Baptist in the wilderness; Daniel's disciplined devotion; Elijah at Horeb, finally hearing God not in the wind or fire but in the silence.

Watch for: Turning self-denial into a performance or a badge of superior devotion; looking down on those with fuller, noisier, more social lives of faith.

5. Activist — "Let me conquer"

Feels closest to God in the middle of a fight for what's right. Energized by confronting injustice, contending for truth, and pushing back against evil rather than by quiet reflection.

Looks like: Advocacy; reform work; direct, sometimes confrontational, engagement with wrong; being willing to be the one who says the hard thing out loud.

Biblical echoes: Moses confronting Pharaoh; Elijah at Mount Carmel; Nehemiah rebuilding the wall under active opposition; Jesus overturning the tables in the temple.

Watch for: Burnout from constant intensity; sliding from hating sin into resenting people; self-righteousness, elitism, and keeping score of who's "really" fighting the good fight.

6. Caregiver — "Let me care"

Loves God by loving people in tangible, practical ways. Faith becomes real through service — meeting someone's actual need, not just praying about it.

Looks like: Caring for the sick; sitting with the grieving; meeting financial or practical needs quietly; the kind of service nobody has to ask for twice.

Biblical echoes: The Good Samaritan; Mordecai's steady care for Esther; Jesus washing His disciples' feet; Dorcas/Tabitha, "always doing good and helping the poor" (Acts 9).

Watch for: Neglecting family or self while pouring out for others; serving to be needed or approved of rather than out of love; quietly judging those who serve less visibly.

7. Enthusiast — "Let me celebrate"

Worships with expectancy, mystery, and joy. Wants God to be surprising — drawn to celebration, spontaneity, and the sense that something is genuinely alive, not scripted.

Looks like: Exuberant worship; celebrating milestones and feast days with real joy; openness to dreams, promptings, and the unexpected; creative expression as an act of devotion.

Biblical echoes: David dancing before the ark without embarrassment; Joseph's and Daniel's God-given dreams; the sheer joy of Pentecost.

Watch for: Chasing the emotional high itself rather than the God behind it; discounting Scripture, tradition, or wise counsel when it conflicts with a strong personal experience.

8. Contemplative — "Let me feel" (adoration)

Seeks simple, quiet intimacy with God — being with Him more than doing things for Him. Devotion looks like a love relationship before it looks like a task list.

Looks like: Centering or breath prayer; long, unhurried silence; a posture more like Mary at Jesus' feet than Martha in the kitchen.

Biblical echoes: Mary of Bethany, choosing "what is better" by simply sitting with Jesus; David's aching, adoring language in Psalm 63; the Song of Solomon's love-language for God.

Watch for: Letting private spiritual experience quietly excuse neglect of obedience, ethics, or other people; being misread as passive or unproductive by more action-oriented believers — and sometimes actually being so.

9. Intellectual — "Let me think"

Connects with God through study — theology, doctrine, the biblical text itself. Understanding isn't a substitute for devotion to this person; it is a form of devotion.

Looks like: Deep Bible study; reading theology and church history; wrestling honestly with hard doctrinal questions; teaching others what's been learned.

Biblical echoes: The Levites, whose assigned role was studying and teaching the law; Solomon's wisdom writing; Paul's dense, careful theological argument throughout Romans.

Watch for: Knowledge that never becomes obedience; intellectual pride; loving the argument more than the people in it; mistaking "knowing about God" for actually knowing Him.

Using this for reflection

Most people register strongly in one or two of these, with a couple more showing up as secondary. **None is more spiritual than another — Thomas's point is that the diversity itself is by design (echoes of 1 Corinthians 12: different gifts, same Spirit).**

Where do I most naturally sense God's nearness — and where have I maybe judged someone else for not getting there the same way I do?

Sources

- [Sacred Pathways summary — Jeremy Silva](#)
- [Sacred Pathways — Mark S. Mitchell](#)
- [Sacred Pathways, Part Two — Bare Feet on Holy Ground](#)
- [Nine Sacred Pathways \(Focus on the Family\)](#)