

“Josiah....the Last Good King”
2 Kings 21:1-23:30; 2 Chronicles 33:1-36:1

I hope you each had a very joyous, S-O-N Son-filled Easter celebrating our Savior's resurrection. I heard that Christmas is the promise, and Easter is the proof. Our faith is based upon an empty tomb, right? Praise God, that because of Jesus, death no longer has the final word.

In this lesson about three kings of Judah, we learned that walking in a repentant life leads to forgiveness; walking in a sinful life leads to consequences; walking in an obedient life leads to rewards.

Our lesson starts with the very worst king in Judah – Manasseh – and ends with the very best king - Josiah. Manasseh was the son of godly Hezekiah. Manasseh was the longest-reigning king in Judah – fifty-five years – most of which was spent committing despicable and horrible evil and he caused God's people to do the same.

Do you remember how bad King Ahab of Israel was? Manasseh was “the Ahab of Judah”. It was as if Manasseh knew what evil practices would most anger the Lord and then intentionally committed them. He undid Hezekiah's religious reforms and reintroduced practices that for generations had caused the nation to sin. Scripture gives us a stunning account of Manasseh's detestable practices, which came from pagan nations the Lord had driven out of the land.

Manasseh rebuilt the high places for idol worship. He consulted wizards and fortune tellers. He committed wholesale bloodshed – killing innocent people. He brought back the worship of Canaanite gods which included the appalling practice of sacrificing little children on the burning arms of bronze idols. His own children were among those sacrificed. Yes, Manasseh's evil was inconceivable.

But wait, there was more to Manasseh's iniquity. Regarding the Temple – God's house - God had told both Kings David and Solomon, "In this Temple and in Jerusalem, I will put my Name forever." (2 Chronicles 33:7) And after Solomon built the Temple, God told him, "My eyes and my heart will always be there." (1 Kings 9:3) Yet, Manasseh placed images of idols in Jerusalem and inside the Temple of the Lord. How grieved the Lord must have been to see His city and His House desecrated - where worship to Him was diverted to that of non-existent deities.

Because of Manasseh and the people's sin, God had had enough. The prophet Jeremiah said it was the sin of Judah initiated by Manasseh, that brought God's judgment to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple and to send the people into exile. God's judgement would prevail. And yet, once again, God's mercy preceded His judgement. Through His prophets, God warned Judah He would bring disaster so devastating that the ears of anyone who heard about it would “tingle”, meaning it would sound so terrible, it would be like a piercing sound in their ears.

God would measure Judah the same way He did Israel, “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line.” (Isaiah 28:17) God's standard for sin is based upon His Word. Our Holy God was going to clean house – clean Judah of its filthiness - as a dirty dish is cleaned, wiped out and turned upside down, empty. Judah would be plundered and the people exiled. This wasn't just a judgement against Manasseh, but against all of Judah. But they paid no attention to God's warning.

You know, some people just don't want to accept their need to change. Here's an example. A man went to see his doctor because his cholesterol was elevated. His doctor told the man to give up red meat. So, the man just stopped putting ketchup on his steaks.

Some people have to suffer a painful situation before they change. The Lord orchestrated an event in Manasseh's life to get his attention. He sent Assyrians to invade Judah and they captured him. They put a hook in his nose, bound him with shackles and led him away like an animal to Babylon.

Why did God put up with the wickedness of Manasseh for so long? For the same reason He has to this point in history: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9) God isn't after the unsaved to punish them. He's after them to save them.

In His goodness, God warns the lost to bring them to repentance. Our God's long-suffering is so evident in this Scripture: "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin? But because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin, you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself. For a day of anger is coming, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." (Romans 2:4-5)

Adversity has a way of changing people and in his distress, the rebellious king was brought to his knees. Manasseh "humbled himself greatly" before God. (2 Chronicles 33:12) Humility is at the heart of repentance. When Manasseh repented, God could have said, "You've messed up royally (pun intended!)", or, "You're just too sinful to be forgiven." Instead, the Lord was moved by his plea, and because of the Lord's mercy and grace, Manasseh was returned to his kingdom. "Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God." (2 Chronicles 33:13)

In 1998, Karla Faye Tucker became the first woman since the Civil War to be executed in Texas. She had committed two brutal murders. While in prison, Karla Faye became a Christian. A co-inmate of Karla Faye's and a Christian herself, said Karla Faye's redemption was dramatic, remarkable. Karla Faye said of herself: "God took this terrible person and showed me that I was worthy of His love." Scriptures tell us, to "Bear fruit *worthy of repentance*" (Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8) This doesn't mean "Bear fruit that *deserves* repentance." Repentance must occur first. "*Repent* and turn to God, performing deeds *worthy of repentance*" (Acts 26:20) Deeds worthy of repentance is the fruit of a changed heart. What was the fruit of Karla Faye's salvation? For 14½ years she lived for Jesus - in prison. She became an evangelist for Him and a Christian counsellor to her fellow inmates. After her execution, the Texas prison system developed a faith-based dorm in Karla Faye's memory.

The story of Karla Faye as well as of Manasseh, shows us that even the most wicked can find God's amazing grace if they're willing to repent. "Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the LORD that He may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for He will forgive generously." (Isaiah 55:7)

And when repentance occurs, there is to be a change in how one lives. What was the fruit of Manasseh's repentance? He destroyed the altars and images of idols. In the Temple, he restored the altar of the Lord.

The summation in Scripture of Manasseh's reign acknowledged that he turned to God, but it also stated that in his life, he committed sins and unfaithfulness. Manasseh's personal salvation and last-minute reforms were important, but his many years of wickedness made Judah's captivity inevitable. God said, "I will make them [Judah] a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh did in Jerusalem." (Jeremiah 15:4) That was one of the consequences of his sin - sins Manasseh spread throughout Judah guaranteed God's judgment.

Manasseh's story demonstrated that while any sin can be forgiven when there is repentance, forgiveness does not necessarily remove the consequences of sin. His repentance did not bring back to life all the innocents he murdered, including his own babies. He had to live with those memories. Sin can leave scars. God allows us to experience consequences of personal sin to create a brokenness and humility within us. "The Lord disciplines him whom he *loves*." (Hebrews 12:6) Thank you, Father, for loving me that much.

Next on the throne, King Amon. Only a few Scriptures tell us about this king. Amon began his reign at the age of twenty-two after the death of his father Manasseh. He reigned two short years which were characterized as evil. Unfortunately, the evil influence Manasseh had on his son during his younger years was likely too ingrained on him to be affected by his father's conversion. There was nothing good to write about Amon. His officials conspired against him and assassinated him. His life was a total waste. However, a breath of fresh air was about to blow through Judah when Josiah, Amon's son became king.

What would your life be like if you lived where every copy of the Bible had been destroyed? I asked myself this, so I'll ask you: How much Scripture have you committed to memory to recite in times of trouble, or when you need direction, or when you need a reminder of God's love? And then what if you found a copy of the Bible hidden somewhere? Would you be so hungry to be nourished by God's words, that you wouldn't be able to put it down? And wouldn't you want to do everything that God said to do in it? That's King Josiah's story.

When Josiah's father was assassinated, Josiah came to the throne at the ripe old age of eight-years-old. Today's eight-year-old boys are into robots, nerf toys, transforming super heroes. Josiah probably played with the Hebrew equivalent of Legos. Eight-year olds can be prone to tantrums and tears. But, with the weight of the southern kingdom of Judah on his shoulders, Josiah was surrounded by followers of Yahweh to guide him, which included the High Priest Hilkiah, the prophetess Huldah, and at times, by the prophets Zephaniah and Jeremiah.

When Josiah was sixteen years old, "He began to seek the God of his father David." (2 Chronicles 34:3) Didn't you think it was awesome that in Josiah's teenage years he was becoming a strong follower of God, especially considering what some teenagers can be like? Here's some comments from parents of teens to illuminate my point: One parent said, "A nice thing my teenage son does to help around the house is to tell us when we're out of the junk food he likes." Another said, "The great thing about having teens who sleep until noon is, I only have to feed them two meals a day." And lastly, "Don't give up hope, you parents of uncommunicative teens. Today my newly-chatty son said "nah" only three hours after I asked him a question."

When Josiah was twenty years old, he began a reformation to exterminate all the idolatrous things his father Amon had reintroduced into the nation. What caused young King Josiah to seek God and begin purging Judah of idolatry? Certainly, it was the influence of his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, as well as the godly men and women surrounding him.

When he was twenty-six years old, Josiah launched a program of national renewal, starting with the Temple in Jerusalem. It had suffered neglect and Josiah authorized High Priest Hilkiah to restore the temple. During the restoration, Hilkiah found the Book of the Law, actually, a scroll. Scholars believe it was the original copy of God's laws written by Moses.

The Temple was a massive structure with many underground rooms and plenty of places to hide such a valuable document to prevent its destruction. However, when buildings were being built, sacred writings were often placed within the foundations or walls. If the scroll was placed there when Solomon built the Temple, it would have been hidden for more than 340 years by the time it was found by Hilkiah.

Hilkiah must have known the scroll was the ancient covenant between God and His people otherwise he would have simply placed it with all the other items found in the Temple. He knew the discovery had to be reported to the king, so he took it to Shaphan, the king's scribe. Shaphan also recognized the importance of the book because he took it to King Josiah and read it to him.

Perhaps the text Shaphan read to Josiah was from Deuteronomy where Moses delivered the Lord's message about idolatrous nations: "Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire." (Deuteronomy 7:5) And also, "If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed." (Deuteronomy 8:19)

Written 800 years earlier, Josiah may have also heard the following prophetic curse and warnings: "The LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other." (Deuteronomy 28:64) "But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess." (Deuteronomy 30:17,18)

When Josiah heard the Lord's warnings read to him, he realized what the future had in store for his people, who during the reign of his father and grandfather, had sunk to the lowest level of immorality and idolatry. Josiah tore his clothes – a sign of deep remorse and humility.

Josiah sent a delegation to consult the prophetess Huldah. We're not told why he sent them to Huldah instead of Zephaniah or Jeremiah, but scholars believe the two prophets were ministering to Israelites living in exile. The delegation would have known of Huldah - the wife of the servant who maintained the king's wardrobe - and that she was a prophetess.

It doesn't appear that Huldah read the book, but she certainly was aware of its contents. As God's mouthpiece, she delivered a harsh prophecy. Because God's people had forsaken Him, His anger towards them would not be quenched. He would send His wrath with all the curses written of in His Word.

But Huldah also delivered words of encouragement just for Josiah. Because he had humbled himself before God, God would have mercy on him. Josiah would be "buried in peace", meaning he would not have to witness the destruction that would come upon Judah.

In hearing Huldah's prophesy, Josiah called the elders, priests and all the people to assemble in the Temple. He read from the book about the covenant God had made with their ancestors through Moses. Standing before the people, he renewed the covenant and pledged to follow the Lord God and to observe His laws with all his heart and all his soul. The people also pledged themselves to the covenant, and for as long as Josiah lived, they did not fail to follow the God of their ancestors.

Josiah began a wide-spread purification that occurred not only in the southern kingdom of Judah but also spread into the former kingdom of Israel.

His reforms included the execution of idolatrous priests. They were burned on their own altars, their bones burned to ashes. In doing so, Josiah was fulfilling a prophesy: "A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you [idolatrous altars] he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on [the altars]." (1 Kings 13:2) The prophesy, written 300 years before, specifically named Josiah to fulfill it!

He removed pagan statues previous kings had put in the Temple of the Lord. Those statues, the idols, wood carvings of Canaanite gods and the people's household gods were crushed, ground into dust and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. When he ran out of those ashes, Josiah exhumed human bones from tombs, burned them, and scattered those ashes on the altars. Because human bones and their ashes defiled places for worship, those places could never again be used. The high places where idol worship occurred were demolished and the land was purged of fortune tellers and of those involved in the occult and astrology.

Josiah then reinstituted the celebration of Passover for all of Judah. It was to be celebrated exactly as was commanded in the book of the law, which took on the name, the Book of the Covenant, because the nation had recommitted themselves to God.

For centuries, the Passover had not been observed as had been commanded by Moses. Not since the days of the prophet Samuel - not in the days of the judges or all the kings of Israel or of Judah – not even when King David reigned. Not for 400 years had the Passover been celebrated like it was during Josiah's reign.

However, despite all that Josiah had done to purge the nation of the idolatry which had infiltrated it for generations, and turned the people back to God, Huldah's prophesy would come to pass. The Lord did not turn away from His fierce anger which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done. So, the Lord said, 'I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this Temple, about which I said, 'My Name shall be there.'" (2 Kings 23:26, 27) King Josiah's reforms did not overcome the consequences of Manasseh's damage to Judah.

Shortly after his reformation was established, Josiah met his death. The Egyptian Pharaoh, Neco, and his army were preparing to fight the Assyrians. Josiah attempted to stop Neco and marched out to meet him in battle. Neco told Josiah he had no quarrel with him, that God revealed that He wanted him, Neco, to enter the battle. We're not told why but perhaps for political reasons Josiah did not heed Neco's warning. He engaged Neco in battle and was fatally wounded.

Josiah is said to be the greatest king of both Judah and Israel. Several kings walked in the ways of David, but only of Josiah is it written that, "He did not turn aside to the right or to the left." (2 Kings 22:2) "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did, with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all of the Law of Moses." (2 Kings 23:25)

Josiah's reformation of the Temple led to the discovery of God's Word. The Word of God provided Josiah clarity about what the Lord required of His people and they were freed, at least temporarily, from the bondage of idol worship. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free." (John 8:32) Day by day, year by year, decade after decade, God's Word never grows old or out of date. And as He did with Josiah, God speaks to us through His Word. However, if we fail to read and obey it, we treat it like it's still a lost book. All God's promises are unchanging, unwavering, and unmovable. He will do what He says He will do whether in blessing or in judgement.

In this lesson we learned that:

Walking in a repentant life leads to *Forgiveness*

The story of Manasseh is one of the best illustrations of God's grace and compassion. Manasseh committed horrible sins and worshipped idols, yet God forgave him when he repented. Repentance leads to God's

forgiveness: “Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away.” (Acts 3:19) “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) God sent Jesus to provide that purification and give us the only way for salvation and forgiveness: “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 5:31) We cannot begin to fathom God’s deep love for us sinners.

Walking in a sinful life leads to *Consequences*

Even though Manasseh repented and demonstrated his changed heart, there were consequences to his sin, the worst being that life was taken from innocent people and a nation would be destroyed. “Forgiveness doesn’t mean that we’ll no longer have to deal with the consequences. Sin always has consequences – always.” (Billy Graham)

The Lord may allow us to experience consequences of our personal sin - even for forgiven sin. This is discipline and it occurs according to the Lord’s sovereign will so we may experience spiritual growth. “God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:10-11)

Although we may suffer painful consequences of sin, we must still rejoice in the Lord's gifts of grace, forgiveness and salvation. Believers are promised that one day the curse and consequences of sin will be removed because God promised, “The ransomed of the LORD will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness.” (Isaiah 35:10)

Walking in an obedient life leads to *Rewards*

Josiah lived a life fully committed and obedient to God and was blessed for it. He was obedient to God’s Law in his responsibility as a king, in how God is to be worshipped, and in purging sin from the nation. God blessed Josiah with success as a king and protected him from witnessing the destruction of Judah.

God rewards obedience. He promises if we will obey Him, blessings will follow. Scripture shows the connection between God’s blessing and obedience: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” (Luke 11:28) And, “Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.” (Psalms 119:1,2)

How do we know what obedience to God involves? How did Josiah know? Through God’s Word. However, as Charles Spurgeon once said, “The devil is not afraid of a dust-covered Bible.”

After generations of flesh-and-blood kings led God’s people toward destruction, the perfect King of Kings was needed to point us to God. When Jesus reigns, His throne will be in the center in the New Jerusalem. We’ll hear loud voices saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)