

Josiah's Reforms



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Chronicles 33, Hab. 1:2–4, 2 Kings 22, Phil. 2:3–8, 2 Kings 23:1–28, 1 Cor. 5:7.*

Memory Text: “Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor after him did any arise like him” (*2 Kings 23:25, NKJV*).

Parents know just how hard it is to see their children, especially when they are older and out of the parents' control, make choices that they know will hurt them. Of course, this heartache doesn't apply only to parents and children: Who hasn't at some point seen friends or relatives or anyone make choices that you knew would be detrimental to them? This is an unfortunate aspect of what it means to have free will. Free will, especially moral free will, means nothing if we don't have the freedom to make wrong choices. A “free” being who can choose only the right is not truly free or even truly moral.

Thus, much of Scripture is the story of God warning His people about not making wrong choices. This has been a major part of what the book of Jeremiah is about, too: the pleadings of God, who respects free choice and free will, to His chosen nation.

And though, unfortunately, most of the stories are not good, this week we will get to see a glimmer of hope; that is, we see one of the few kings who, using free will, chose to do what “was right in the sight of the LORD.”

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 21.

The Reigns of Manasseh and Amon

However much we like to talk about objectivity, about viewing things as they really are, as human beings we are hopelessly subjective. We see the world, not so much as the world really is but as we really are. And because we are fallen and corrupted beings, this corruption is going to impact our perceptions and interpretation of the world around us. How else, for instance, can we explain someone like King Manasseh of Judah (about 686–643 B.C.), especially those early years of his terrible apostasy? One can hardly imagine how he justified in his own mind the horrific abominations he allowed to flourish in Judah.

Read 2 Chronicles 33. What does this story tell us about just how corrupt a king Manasseh was? More important, what does this teach us about the willingness of God to forgive?

No question, being hauled off to Babylon with nose hooks and bronze fetters was certain to get a man to rethink his life. Nevertheless, the text is clear: Manasseh truly repented of his ways and, when restored to the throne, sought to repair the damage that he had done. Unfortunately, the damage was greater than he might have imagined.

“But this repentance, remarkable though it was, came too late to save the kingdom from the corrupting influence of years of idolatrous practices. Many had stumbled and fallen, never again to rise.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 383. And, even more unfortunate, among those who had been terribly impacted by Manasseh’s apostasy was his son, Amon, who took the throne after his father died and who “did evil in the sight of the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done; for Amon sacrificed to all the carved images which his father Manasseh had made, and served them” (2 Chron. 33:22, NKJV). Worse, unlike his father, Amon never repented of his ways.

Who doesn’t know personally the terrible consequences that can come even from sin that has been forgiven? What promises can you claim for the victory over sin? Why not claim them now before the sin brings its doleful consequences?

A New King

A preacher once said, “Be careful what you pray for. You just might get it.” Israel asked for and longed for a king, just like the nations around it. The people got what they asked for, and so much of Israelite history after the era of the judges was the story of how these kings corrupted themselves on the throne and, as a result, corrupted the nation as well.

Nevertheless, there were always exceptions, such as King Josiah, who ascended the throne in 639 B.C. and ruled until 608 B.C.

What was the context in which the new king had come to the throne?
(See 2 Chron. 33:25.)

Though democracy is supposed to be rulership by the people, it generally wasn’t conceived of functioning as it did in this case. Nevertheless, the people made their will known, and it was done according to their will. The young king came to the throne at a time of great turmoil, apostasy, and violence, even at the highest levels of government. Seeing what was going on, many faithful in the land had wondered whether God’s promises to ancient Israel could ever be fulfilled. “From a human point of view the divine purpose for the chosen nation seemed almost impossible of accomplishment.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 384.

The anxiety of the faithful ones was expressed in the words of the prophet Habakkuk in Habakkuk 1:2–4. What is the prophet saying?

Unfortunately, the answer to the problems of iniquity, violence, strife, and lawlessness would come, but from the north, from the Babylonians, whom God would use to bring judgment upon His wayward people. As we have seen all along, it didn’t have to be that way; however, because of their refusal to repent, they faced the punishment that their sins brought upon them.

From a human point of view, how often does “the divine purpose” seem to be impossible to accomplish? What does this tell us about how we need to reach out in faith beyond what we see or fully understand?

Josiah on the Throne

“Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem. And his mother’s name was Jedidah, the daughter of Adaiah of Boscath. And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:1, 2).

Considering the context of Josiah coming to the throne, what is so remarkable about the above texts?

The Bible doesn’t give us any explanation for this remarkable young man who, considering the circumstances, was most likely destined to be as corrupt and wicked as his father before him. That, however, wasn’t the case. For whatever reasons, he chose a different course, and that was to have a positive, though ultimately limited, impact on the nation.

Second Kings 22 mentions what Josiah did in regard to the temple. From the dedication of the temple by Solomon, long centuries had passed until Josiah’s reforms (622 B.C.). The kings had not really taken care of the temple. Time had eroded the building, which had once been beautiful. The young king saw that the temple was no longer suitable for worship as a result of long years of neglect.

What did Josiah do when he discovered the temple was in such disrepair? 2 Kings 22:3–7.

Today we would say that the king sent his minister of finance to the high priest and asked him to plan and oversee the materials and labor required to renovate the temple. They did not have to account for the money with which they were entrusted because they were acting faithfully. For whatever reasons, Josiah showed trust in them, and as far as the record shows, that trust was honored.

Refurbishing the temple is fine, but in the end, what really is crucial for a true revival and reformation? (See Phil. 2:3–8.)

The Book of the Law

The renovation of the temple, long the center of Israelite worship, was important, but renovation of a building wasn't all that was needed. The most beautiful and elaborate structure, though designed to help worshipers sense something of the power and grandeur of the Lord, in and of itself isn't enough to evoke piety among the people. History is replete with the sad stories of people who one minute were "worshipping" in some beautiful church somewhere and the next minute were walking out and committing an atrocity, which was perhaps even instigated by what they learned inside that beautiful structure.

What happened during the renovation of the temple? What is the powerful significance of Josiah's reaction to those events? *2 Kings 22:8–11.*

They found the "Book of the Law." The Bible doesn't specify which of Moses' writings were found. It was probably found buried in the walls somewhere in the temple.

Read *2 Kings 22:12–20.* What was Huldah's message from God to the people and for King Josiah? What should these words say to us?

Huldah transmitted the same message Jeremiah had already prophesied several times. The people who had turned away from God had dug their own grave through their deeds, and they were going to reap the consequences. Josiah never would see the trouble and die in peace.

"Through Huldah the Lord sent Josiah word that Jerusalem's ruin could not be averted. Even should the people now humble themselves before God, they could not escape their punishment. So long had their senses been deadened by wrongdoing that, if judgment should not come upon them, they would soon return to the same sinful course. 'Tell the man that sent you to me,' the prophetess declared, 'Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: because they have forsaken Me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched.' Verses 15–17."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 399.

Josiah's Reforms

Despite the forewarning of doom, Josiah was still determined to do what was “right in the sight of the LORD.” Maybe disaster couldn’t be averted, “but in announcing the retributive judgments of Heaven, the Lord had not withdrawn opportunity for repentance and reformation; and Josiah, discerning in this a willingness on the part of God to temper His judgments with mercy, determined to do all in his power to bring about decided reforms.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 400.

Read 2 Kings 23:1–28. What was the essence of the reform that the faithful king sought to bring to his corrupted nation? What do these acts tell us about just how bad things had become in the chosen nation?

Josiah gathered all the people in Jerusalem in order to renew their covenant with God. The recently found Book of the Law was read, and then they made the vow to follow the God of Israel.

The king did not execute this work by himself but asked those who had spiritual responsibilities to do what was needed. As an example, throughout the centuries, different objects—statues and symbols that popularized foreign worship in Israel—had been gathered into the temple. Sometimes they had been part of the conditions of peace, imposed upon the nation; sometimes kings had exhibited them in order to signify their pacification, a sign of surrender. Whatever the reasons, they did not belong there, and Josiah ordered them removed and destroyed.

Also, the Passover celebration during Josiah’s reform did not take place only within the family households, as had been the custom before, but now the whole nation celebrated it together. Its symbolic message for the people was that they had left the old era behind them, and that they had now entered a new time in which they vowed to serve the true God, who led them out of Egypt, who provided a home for the tribes as He had promised, and who was with them in their everyday lives.

The significance in celebrating the national Passover was to start something new because (ideally, anyway) all the old things had come to an end. What should the symbolism of the Passover mean to us now, as Seventh-day Adventists? (See 1 Cor. 5:7.)

Further Thought: As the lesson stated, the depth of corruption that had befallen Israel can be seen in the kind of reforms that Josiah had to undertake. How, though, could the nation have fallen so far? In one sense, the answer is easy: it's because humanity has fallen so far. Just how far humanity has degraded was revealed in a famous experiment conducted at Yale University in the 1960s.

Participants were brought in arbitrarily through newspaper ads and told that they were to administer electric shocks to people tied down to chairs in another room. The switches that administered the shocks were marked from "Slight Shock" to "Danger: Severe Shock," including two more ominously marked "XXX." Participants were told to administer the shocks according to the orders of the scientist leading the experiment. As they did, the participants would hear the people in the other room scream and plead for mercy. In reality, the people in the other room were just acting; they were not getting shocked at all. The point of the study was to see how far these "normal" participants would go in inflicting what they thought was pain on those whom they didn't know, simply because they had been ordered to do it. The results were frightening. Though many participants got anxious, distraught, and even angry, that didn't stop *a stunning 65 percent* from administering the severest "shocks" to these people, believing that they were truly hurting them. "Ordinary people," wrote the scientist who conducted the experiment, "simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process." How many "ordinary" people have done terrible things throughout history, or even today? Too many have, for sure. Why? Christians know the answer. We are sinners, plain and simple.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What does the story of Josiah's reform tell us about the importance of the Word of God in our lives?
- ② A valid question could be raised now: If it were too late to avoid the coming catastrophe, why the call for repentance and revival and reformation? What was the purpose of it all? What answer would you give? In what ways might the reason be found in how such a revival would impact the people individually, as opposed to the nation as a whole?

God's Saving Hand: Part 1

Wesley Banda pastored several villages in Malawi. The family lived in a two-room house. Because the area had no electricity, Mrs. Banda prepared the family meals outside over an open fire.

One evening after dinner, Mrs. Banda returned to her fire to prepare the morning meal of *sadza* (a thick porridge of cornmeal). Her husband sat in the family's front room, working on some papers. The children sat quietly waiting for family devotions, but five-year-old Joshua had fallen asleep.

As Pastor Banda lit the kerosene lamp, their only source of light, the flame sputtered because the lamp was running low on fuel. He fetched the kerosene and began refilling the tank. But unknown to him, the kerosene was contaminated with a small amount of gasoline. As he poured the fuel into the lamp's reservoir, the fumes caught fire, and the lamp exploded in his hands.

Instinctively Pastor Banda threw the lamp across the room, but his clothes had caught fire. Mrs. Banda saw her husband run out the door, his clothes aflame. She immediately threw a pan of water onto his burning clothes while he rolled on the ground. Soon the fire was out.

The children ran out of the house, screaming, "Fire! Fire!" The burning fuel had set the front room ablaze. In the excitement, nobody noticed that little Joshua was missing. Moments later Mrs. Banda looked at the doorway and saw Joshua crawling out of the house; his clothes were burning. She shrieked and grabbed her youngest child and dropped him into a pan of water. The fire hissed and went out, but Joshua was terribly burned.

Their village had no clinic or hospital; so, a neighbor ran to the house of a farmer who had a car. They banged on his door and begged for his immediate help. He rushed over to drive the Bandas to the nearest hospital. Even so, it was nearly midnight when the family entered the hospital emergency room. It had been more than four hours since the explosion.

The doctors shook their heads as they looked at the burns that the pastor and his son had suffered. Pastor Banda's burns were serious, but little Joshua was injured even more seriously. Terrible burns covered his legs, stomach, and chest. Every movement brought screams of pain from the little boy. Even while the doctors worked to save the father and son some of the doctors tried to prepare the family for the likelihood that Joshua wouldn't survive.

"We're doing everything we can for your son," the doctor said gently. "But he is so badly burned that it would be a blessing if he died."

"No!" Mrs. Banda said firmly. "God has saved his life. Do what you must, but God will save my son."

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.