

Lesson 17: The Babylonian Exile (2 Kings 21-25; 2 Chronicles 33-36)

Manasseh: The Worst of the Worst

The reign of Hezekiah is passed onto his son, Manasseh. Unfortunately, Manasseh will turn out to be the most-wicked king in the history of the Israelites. While Hezekiah tore down the “high places” of pagan worship, Manasseh, having no pretense of being faithful to the Law, rebuilds the “high places” and defiles the Temple with pagan worship.¹ He is, one could say, a counter-reformer who overturns the reforms of his father. He rules for fifty-five years and oversees a culture that is so corrupt that the Book of the Law (Deuteronomy) is lost and the people forget that it ever existed. Manasseh goes on to promote the worst forms of idolatry and paganism, including child sacrifice – he even sacrifices his own sons.² Twice Manasseh’s reign is compared to that of the northern kingdom’s king Ahab, the wicked husband of Jezebel, to demonstrate how sweeping his evil influence is over Judah.³

We see that while Hezekiah made some reforms, it can be questioned just how genuine he was since the reforms are easily reversed by Manasseh. Wisdom literature says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”⁴ While a parent is not able to control the decisions of his or her child, it is unlikely a child will be as wicked as Manasseh if his or her parents are close to the Lord. Clearly Hezekiah did not form his son in the ways of the Lord, which suggests that his reforms were partly cosmetic.

Manasseh’s wickedness and the wickedness of the people are so severe that God allows Judah and Jerusalem to be overtaken by the Assyrians, and Manasseh is taken in chains back to Babylon.⁵ This should no doubt be a loud wake-up call to the people to repent and turn back to Yahweh. Should they remain in their sin, the entire nation will be exiled, just as happened with the northern tribes. Generations earlier God had warned Israel to be faithful to the Lord even after they gain the Promised Land, and commanded the people to meditate on the law day and night so that they would not forget God’s faithfulness and turn back to idolatry.⁶ Deuteronomy warns that if the people forget all that God did for them and fail to live according to the law, the land will be taken from them.⁷ And now we see this to happening.

The sin of Manasseh and the people is so serious that God promises to bring great punishment down on Jerusalem: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab; and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it

¹ 2 Kings 21:2-5

² 2 Chronicles 33:1-9; 2 Kings 21:6

³ 1 Kings 16:29-34; 2 Kings 21:3, 13

⁴ Proverbs 22:6

⁵ 2 Chronicles 33:11; 2 Kings 21:15 uses the plural pronoun, thereby implying that it is more than Manasseh who has turned wicked, but all the people.

⁶ Joshua 1:8

⁷ Deuteronomy 8:11-20

and turning it upside down. And I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt.”⁸ This is strong language, but it simply echoes what God told Moses generations earlier: the people will lose God’s blessings if they disobey and reject Yahweh.⁹ And yet they become even more wicked than the other nations exemplified most dramatically by Manasseh killing innocent children in the name of pagan gods.¹⁰ This is the breaking point for God’s patience. God will not endure the killing of innocent life. As a result Jerusalem will be destroyed and the kingdom lost.¹¹

Amazingly, the mercy of God reaches out even in the midst of such sin. In his misery, Manasseh repents¹² and God accepts his change of heart, allowing Manasseh to return to Jerusalem as king. Manasseh does his best to restore righteousness among the people but their sin is so deep that they do not follow him and they remain set in their idolatry. After his death, Manasseh’s son, Amon, governs as a wicked and unrighteous king, stuck in pagan worship.¹³ Amon learns his father’s sin, but not his repentance.

It is encouraging to see that the power of God is such that even a man steeped in sin as terrible as pagan worship and child sacrifice can be renewed in spirit. There is always hope. The consequences of sin, however, often remain, as we see with the people whom Manasseh led into sin. They do not have a conversion of heart as he did, and when Manasseh’s son, Amon, becomes king, the people fall right back into their public idolatry. We see that sin is easily adopted, but not easily rooted out.

Judah has not learned the lesson from Israel and is playing with fire. They have forgotten what God told Aaron and Israel when they crossed into the Promised Land to “take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day...and if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.”¹⁴ The sin of Judah is risking its very existence.

Josiah: The Great Reformer

Perhaps as the fruit of Manasseh’s repentance, his grandson, Josiah, is a man of great faith and described as the most righteous king of Judah, even more than David.¹⁵ Josiah is the great reformer who brings Israel, even if just temporarily, back to fidelity to the Law. He ascends the throne at the very young age of eight and at sixteen “began to seek

⁸ 2 Kings 21:12-15

⁹ Deuteronomy 8:11-20

¹⁰ 2 Kings 21:16; “Innocent blood,” here, is a euphemism for children.

¹¹ 2 Kings 21:11-12

¹² 2 Chronicles 33:12-13

¹³ 2 Kings 21:19-26; 2 Chronicles 33:21-25

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 8:11-20

¹⁵ The two accounts of Josiah’s reign (640-609 BC) are in 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35.

the God of David.”¹⁶ “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.”¹⁷ Holiness, we see, is not reserved for the aged, and we should not be shy about challenging our youth to heroic sanctity. In fact, it is sometimes an injustice not to expect more from the youth.¹⁸ By the time he turns twenty, Josiah reforms the entire nation by beginning to remove altars and images of idolatry from the places of public worship spaces and begins to repair the Temple. Things had been so bad that in the renovations they find the Book of the Law (likely the book of Deuteronomy), which had been lost and forgotten.¹⁹ Imagine that, what was once the very heart of their worship and culture had been so badly ignored that its very existence is forgotten. The loss of the Law proves just how low the Israelites had gone in their neglect of the covenant.

Manasseh failed as a just and righteous king because he did not follow the Law, so much so that it was literally lost. Not only were the people not meditating on the Law, they did not even know of its existence. A key aspect of the Law, remember, is the need to meditate on the goodness of the Lord.²⁰ This is a sure means to fidelity to God: listening to the Lord. It is when we make consistent time to hear the Lord through prayer and meditation that we are able to follow His plan for our lives. When we fail to meditate on the good deeds of God, we forget his place in our lives and turn to distractions, many of which lead us to grave sin, as happens with Judah.

The discovery of the Law is at the heart of Josiah’s reforms. Upon finding the Book of Deuteronomy, Josiah has it read to him. As he hears the Law he rips his garments in two as a sign of righteous anger. The Law is clear that if it is not obeyed Israel will bring a curse down upon itself.²¹ Josiah is angered by the infidelity of his fathers and the people. He hears for the first time, “But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you.”²² Josiah recognizes that Israel has placed itself under the curse of the Law.²³ He gathers the people together and reads the Book of the Law to them, and they swear to renounce idolatry and keep the Commandments. Josiah destroys all the pagan altars and expels the cult prostitutes.²⁴ He does all of this even though they were already under the curse, and so there was no immediate benefit. Josiah obeyed the law for love of righteousness, not for any personal gain. The Scriptures say, “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and

¹⁶ 2 Chronicles 34:3

¹⁷ 2 Chronicles 34:2

¹⁸ John Paul II established the semi-annual celebration of World Youth Day, which has attracted millions of youth throughout the world to respond to the call to follow Christ. The success of World Youth Day proves that young people do want Christ in their lives.

¹⁹ 2 Kings 22:8-13; 2 Chronicles 34:14-21

²⁰ Deuteronomy 11:18-28

²¹ Deuteronomy 28:36-49

²² Deuteronomy 28:15

²³ 2 Kings 22:16-20; 2 Chronicles 34:21

²⁴ He does what the Law commands: to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, all with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5)

with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.”²⁵ Finally, a righteous leader rules the people.²⁶

In his zeal for Yahweh, however, Josiah acts foolishly. He goes into battle against Neco, the king of Egypt. Neco does not want to battle Josiah, even to the point of telling him that the God of Israel does not desire Judah to go to battle against Egypt.²⁷ And yet in his passion Josiah goes into the battlefield and is killed in the prime of his life. How could a man so pious and faithful to the Lord meet such a violent end at the hands of his enemy? This is a difficult question considering the Old Testament notion that God blesses the just with life and wealth, and punishes the unrighteous. Josiah died the way he did, in part, because he did not hear the voice of God speaking through Pharaoh who told Josiah not to go to battle against him. This is a strong example that godliness does not eliminate foolishness; wisdom and good counsel should always direct sanctity. This is why it is important to have good spiritual direction from those around us as one grows in holiness. Again, we see the importance of listening. If we do not listen to the voice of God, or to wise or holy people around us, we are apt to fall either in disobedience to God, or by imprudent action. Zealousness should always be tempered by prudence, which is found through prayer, meditation and sound counsel.

But perhaps the deeper meaning of Josiah’s death is its anticipation of what Christ’s own death means: the suffering of the innocent is a mystery that is at the heart of God’s redemptive plan. The suffering servant in Isaiah, or Job, or the subject of Ecclesiastes endures trials of pain and suffering for reasons other than their own sin. What does this mean? It is Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection that shed light on the pain of the innocent: guilt is adopted by an innocent man to redeem all men and women who are under the curse of sin. As Saint Paul said, “For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.”²⁸ We see here a development in the Old Testament approach to faith. The early historical books promise material gain for one’s fidelity to God. Now we see a movement to the spiritual good, and martyrdom will prove to be the strongest example of this. This is in stark contrast to the “health and wealth” gospel that is sometimes popular, which says that God shows his blessing by bestowing material gain. Christ, the early Church and martyrs throughout the centuries are evidence that God’s blessings are first spiritual, not material.

Zedekiah, Jeremiah and the Jubilee

For all of Josiah’s reforms, after his death the people of Judah immediately turn back to idolatry and paganism. Each of Josiah’s sons (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin) betrays their oath of fidelity to the Lord and governs through corruption and injustice (they do “what is evil in the sight of the Lord”). This time God’s judgment is swift. One

²⁵ 2 Kings 23:25

²⁶ The language used to describe Josiah is reserved for just a few key figures in salvation history: Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10); Solomon (1 Kings 3:12); Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:5); Yahweh and Jesus (Isaiah 40:18, 25; John 6:68).

²⁷ 2 Chronicles 35:20-22

²⁸ Romans 5:15

by one, more powerful kings carry away each of Josiah's sons. The first is Jehoahaz, who is carried off by the Egyptian pharaoh. Pharaoh places the next brother, Jehoiakim, in his place, but keeps him under Egyptian control.²⁹ Not long after, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, comes and defeats Jehoiakim, taking him back to Babylon (which is to the east of Jerusalem, modern day Iraq), along with much of Judah's wealth, leaving Jehoiakim's eight-year-old son, Jehoiachin, as a puppet king.³⁰ Only three months later Nebuchadnezzar again lays siege of Jerusalem, taking all the treasures of the Temple and the city, and takes into captivity all the noble households and much of the army back to Babylon. This time Nebuchadnezzar leaves Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, as king of Judah.³¹ All of these defeats are understood to be the fruit "for the sins of Manasseh."³² And yet in spite of all of this, the people of Judah still do not repent.

At this time the prophet Jeremiah begins his ministry and preaches the urgency of repentance (626 BC). He condemns pagan idolatry and calls for a return to the Law. Needless to say, this is not a popular message with a people that has become self-indulgent in cultic practices.

Jeremiah goes to Zedekiah and warns of an upcoming punishment for his sins and the sins of the people. Zedekiah's heart softens and he calls for conversion through the honoring of a jubilee year.³³ Every seventh day on the Sabbath was to be a remembrance of Israel's liberation from slavery. This was to be honored and set aside for worship (*avad*) of Yahweh. Additionally, every seventh year was to be a Sabbath year, and every fiftieth year (the year following seven times seven years) was to be the Year of Jubilee – the Sabbath of Sabbath's.³⁴ Generations earlier Moses gave the people special social legislation to be enacted during the jubilee year. They can be summarized in three precepts: 1) all debts were to be cancelled; 2) all slaves freed; 3) all patrimonial land (inheritance) returned to the family who originally owned it.³⁵

The honoring of the Jubilee is to remember what Yahweh did for Israel, freeing them from slavery in order to give them the Promised Land. The Jubilee, then, was a reenactment of the Exodus and a renewal of the internal exodus from the slavery of sin. Just as God had saved the Israelites, Judah/Israel was to do the same for the poor and needy in their midst. Zedekiah does well to call for a jubilee year but the people quickly take back all they had set free.³⁶ By refusing to imitate God's mercy by freeing slaves, canceling debts, and taking care of the poor, the people of Judah refuse to live by the lessons of the Exodus. Because they bound their own people in debt and chains, Judah herself will be bound in chains and taken into Babylon. And just as Jacob's sons sold Joseph into slavery and then became slaves themselves, so too will Judah. The people of

²⁹ 2 Kings 23:33-34

³⁰ 2 Kings 24:1-6

³¹ 2 Kings 24:8-17

³² 2 Kings 24:3

³³ Jeremiah 34:1-10

³⁴ CCC, #2172

³⁵ Deuteronomy 15:1ff; Leviticus 25:1-4, 8-10, 39-42

³⁶ Jeremiah 34:11-16

Judah have not learned the lessons of salvation history, but it is a lesson that must be learned.

The Destruction of Jerusalem

The honoring of the Jubilee was a noble act of faith, but it was short-lived. Yahweh proclaims that because of their sin Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians and the people will be scattered or killed.³⁷ And because Jeremiah is the messenger of this difficult news, the people beat him, throw him down a well and threaten him with death. As sometimes happens, the messenger is punished for the sins of the guilty. Jeremiah's life is mercifully spared and Zedekiah sends for him to hear what God has to say. Jeremiah tells him, "Obey now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared."³⁸ Jeremiah says that it is not too late and they can save their lives, but if Zedekiah and the people do not obey Jerusalem will be destroyed.³⁹

Zedekiah, however, does not obey.⁴⁰ He is overcome with fear because the Babylonians surround the city. Zedekiah does not trust in the Lord and the city is taken. His sons are tortured and killed in front of him just before his eyes are gouged out, so the last thing he sees is the murder of his sons.⁴¹ Jerusalem and the Temple are utterly destroyed (586 BC), its wealth taken back to Babylon and all the people not killed in the siege, except for a small remnant of poor, are marched back to Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans.⁴² It is a tragic end to a long story of sin and disobedience. The road to Babylon was likely the same path that Abraham walked generations earlier, except in reverse. They have gone full-circle, from slavery to liberation, back to slavery. The walk is a reversal of salvation history, and they lose everything that had been gained because they would not trust the Lord. The end of Judah as a nation comes with a strong hand and leaves the Chosen People without land and without the Temple.⁴³ Everything that had been gained is now lost. The Psalmist laments:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the sons of Zion!"

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!⁴⁴

The exile from the Promised Land should not be seen simply as political defeat. Rather, with the exile God allows Israel to physically experience what they had done a long time

³⁷ Jeremiah 34:17-22

³⁸ Jeremiah 38:20

³⁹ Jeremiah prophesies the complete destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 4:23-26; 19:1-3, 7-11).

⁴⁰ Jeremiah 37:1-9; 38:2-14

⁴¹ 2 Kings 25:7

⁴² Jeremiah manages to hide the Ark of the Covenant before Jerusalem is sacked (see 2 Maccabees 2:4-8).

⁴³ This is known as the Babylonian Exile.

⁴⁴ Psalms 137:1-6

earlier, that is, turn away from God and turn toward the slavery of sin. Through their sin and breaking the covenant, the Israelites exile themselves from the Lord. They experience physically what they chose to embrace spiritually. Just as they are enslaved to sin, now they are enslaved to the Babylonians. The Assyrians conquered Israel, and now the Babylonians conquer Judah. This is an event that is burned into Jewish memory, which is the result of the sins of Manasseh and the people of Judah. As the Scripture says, “Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon.”⁴⁵

While Jerusalem is practically destroyed, Jeremiah and the poor are allowed to stay in the ruined city. Their conquerors show them mercy, giving them provisions so that they may survive. In fact, Jeremiah and his companions are given the choice of all the land.⁴⁶ It is an unlikely turn of events, but it is a reminder that God will take care of those who trust in Him. Those, like Zedekiah, who trust in themselves fall to ruin, and those who place their trust in the Lord, like Jeremiah, survive. This is the work of the spiritual life – to put our trust in the Lord. The more we are able to abandon ourselves to the will of God, the more we avail ourselves of the goodness of the Lord. We must have trust that God will remain faithful to His promise even if all hope seems lost.

⁴⁵ 2 Kings 24:3-4

⁴⁶ Jeremiah 39:11-40:8