

Josiah's True Repentance

“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 the Law of Moses.”

2 Kings 23:25

How do we stay in the story when the Word of God is buried under the weight of pressing personal concerns, light-hearted anecdotes, nerve-tensing political rhetoric, and ideological wrangling? When Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary of state, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord,” he knew he was onto something important. News of the discovery traveled up the chain of command to the king, but not before Shaphan read the Book of the Law for himself. The story is told with a growing sense of suspense as the secretary read from the book in the presence of the 26 year old king. We cannot help but wonder what Josiah’s response will be.

It is still breaking news when someone says, “I have found the Word of God” and really means it. For as in the days of Josiah, the Word lies buried, not under a pile of rubble, but under the weight of intellectual suspicion, religious pride, feelings of secular superiority, spiritual apathy, or just plain laziness.

On a visit to southern Wales in the early seventies Professor Don Carson and his wife visited a Calvinist Methodist church. It was apparent to them that the church had lost its orthodox heritage in favor of theological liberalism. During a fellowship time, they were served tea by a woman who seemed to be in her eighties. Don asked the woman if she had been in this church for a long time.

“Oh, yes, all my life,” she replied. “I was brought up in this valley.”

"You must have seen a lot of changes during that time," he persisted.

"Yes, many changes," she agreed.

"Tell me," he said, "is it true that in the Welsh Revival so many miners were converted and cleaned up their language, that their pit ponies that hauled out the coal could no longer understand them?"

Her face lit up. "You know about the Welsh Revival?" she said eagerly. "I was converted in the Revival, just a young girl I was." And then for a half an hour she told story after story of the Welsh Revival.

"Tell me, please, what do you do now for spiritual nourishment? Who teaches you the Word of God? Where do you find fellowship?"

She smiled and patted his hand. "I listen every week to the Back to the Bible broadcast on the radio, out of Morocco."

Don Carson found it more than ironic, in fact tragic, that a place once known for fervent faith in Christ and transformed lives had now become virtually destitute of the Word of God.

During King Manasseh's long fifty-five year reign someone decided to put the Law of God in storage. Undoubtedly the book was deemed out-of-date and contrary to the king's aggressive campaign to open Judah up to religious pluralism and the exciting spiritualities shaping the surrounding nations. Manasseh brought sweep reforms, billed as innovative and creative. He introduced fertility cults, child sacrifice, and placed foreign idols in the temple. No wonder the Book of the Law lay forgotten for decades until Hilkiah the high priest discovered it. Of course this sad state of affairs could never happen in modern Christianity, because we have Bibles everywhere. But what we cannot lose we can casually ignore and what we take for granted we can easily neglect and what contradicts our thinking we can wilfully choose to reject. Familiarity with the text can breed an indifference to the truth, even contempt. It is safe to say that the Bible will never go out of print; it is not in danger of vanishing, but it is in danger of being trivialized, compromised and spiritualized.

Bible Stories versus God's Salvation History Story

It is common today for preachers to begin sermons with a human interest story or concern. This generates curiosity and identifies with the audience.

Their starting point is the existential self, with a focus on some personal concern or longing. The sermon may have to do with facing change or going through hard times. Hot topics include: self-esteem, success, marriage, parenting, time management and stress. Issues such as guilt and forgiveness, emptiness and meaninglessness are covered with an overriding concern for the individual self (How does this effect Me?).

In many ways this is a valid approach because the Lord God seeks to save and transform each one of us personally, but if we are not careful what begins as a subtle shift of focus from God to Self becomes an intractable reorientation to spirituality. Instead of asking how do we fit into God's Salvation History story, we are always asking how does God fit into our individual personal stories. In other words, the existential starting point becomes the whole point, not only of the sermon, but spirituality. God relates to me for my sake. I don't relate to God for his sake. When this happens the Bible becomes a collection of stories and principles that can be used by a creative preacher to inspire and instruct me, so I leave a little different than when I came. I go to church to feel comforted, challenged, inspired, and even, at times, I go to feel a little guilty. All the while I am in control of my spirituality. I measure out the dosage of how much I want to take in. Spirituality becomes my own personal project and quest.

Sermons and Bible studies oriented around the Self principle obscure the meaning of the Bible by drawing out what meets immediate felt needs and disregarding the rest. This helps to account for the narrowing range of biblical influence in many believers' lives and the expanding influence of the world and the "spirit of the times." Believers turn to the Bible to inspire their souls and to the world to inspire their success. They turn to the Bible to deal with guilt and to the world for entertainment. They look to the Bible for comfort and to the world for excitement. For many, it is the Bible on love and the world on sex; the Bible on peace and world on politics; the Bible on forgiveness and the world on freedom. Instead of the Word of God shaping the totality of life, a believer's life is split into spheres of influence, resulting in a spirituality that shapes one's private world and a secularization that shapes one's public world. This approach to the Bible accounts for seemingly spiritually minded believers being habitually self-centered rather than God-honoring in their daily lives. This is evident in a believer's business practices, sexual behavior, indulgent lifestyle, pursuit of pleasure, and intellectual outlook. In today's spiritual climate people do not lose the Bible literally as much as forsake it practically.

Manasseh's Legacy

Regardless of the cultural situation, it has never been easy to obey the Bible faithfully, and seventh century B.C. Judah was no exception. When Josiah came to power, popular spirituality was the product of Manasseh's 55 year reign, in which he followed "the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them." Furthermore, "he sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists" (2 Chronicles 33:2-6). At the end of his life, when Judah was threatened by the advances of Assyria, Manasseh had a change of heart. He humbled himself before the Lord and instituted reforms. But these reforms had little impact on the people; they were too little too late. His son, Amon, came to power and in his short two year reign reversed his father's reforms and did all the evil that his father had done.

When Josiah came to power at the age of eight, he inherited a spiritual disaster of staggering proportions but there is not the slightest hint of disappointment with God. If anything, the historical narrative highlights the patience of a longsuffering God, rather than questions how God could allow Manasseh to rule for 55 years. However, in today's climate of spiritual skepticism, believers are tempted to compare Manasseh's lengthy reign to David's 40 year reign, Solomon's 40 year reign, and Hezekiah's 29 year reign, and then feel disappointed with God for Manasseh's unchecked apostasy. Thankfully, Josiah refused to blame God for human evil. He did not allow the depravity of the past to shape his devotion to God in the present. He rejected a culture of cynicism and embraced spiritual renewal. From the start, even before the Book of the Law was discovered, Josiah instituted building repairs for the temple and he did so with a leadership style that empowered people. He honored the faithfulness of the workers by entrusting them with financial resources (2 Ki 22:4-7). It is not surprising then to read that Josiah responded to the Book of the Law with heartfelt repentance.

A Singular Moment

Shaphan, the secretary of state, rather than Hilkiah the high priest, read from the book in the presence of the king. Future references report that Shaphan and his family served God faithfully. His son Ahikam aided Jeremiah (Jer 26:24) and his other son, Gemariah, tried to persuade Jehoiakim, Josiah's successor, not to burn Jeremiah's message (Jer 36:12,

25). Shaphan's grandson, Gedaliah, became governor of Judah and tried to implement Jeremiah's counsel for the remnant living in Jerusalem following the fall of the city in 597 BC (Jer 40:5-10). Three generations of faithfulness to the Word of God began when Shaphan took the initiative to read from the Book of the Law, first for himself and then for the king. This was a defining moment for Shaphan and his family.

These words from Deuteronomy would have been included in what Shaphan read before king Josiah:

"Here now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live...Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you" (Deut 4:1-4).

"Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.... Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

"After you have had children and grandchildren and lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you" (Deut 4:9, 23-27).

Josiah's response to the reading of God's Word illustrates the impact of true repentance. In a symbolic act of heartfelt contrition and remorse, he tore his robe. Then he dispatched his top officials with emphatic orders, "Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this

book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us" (2 Ki 22:13). Under the terms of the old covenant, Josiah's request for mediation is understandable. The king's advisors immediately went to Huldah, a prophetess, who was married to a palace official. She repeated the message of judgment found in Deuteronomy, and then concluded with God's promise for the king, "Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord. Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place" (2 Ki 22:19-20).

Josiah's singular moment of heartfelt repentance and genuine humility before the Lord ignited a national renewal moment, the likes of which Judah had not seen for 75 years. King Josiah took decisive action.

First, he called all the leaders and all the people together, "from the least to the greatest" and "he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant" (2 Ki 23:2). He stood by the pillar in the temple and "renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord," with words right out of Deuteronomy (see Deut. 6:5, 17). This in turn led to the people's decisive action. "Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant" (2 Ki 23:3).

We face a similar challenge in our own day to take the Word of God seriously. All the more, because we do not labor under the Law of the old covenant, but we live under the grace of the new covenant made by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We do not need to consult a prophet or prophetess to see if our repentance is adequate. We depend upon the grace of Christ. As the writer of Hebrews said, "Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." We must not take the grace of God lightly and the author of Hebrews reminds us, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice of sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10:19-22, 26-27).

Second, Josiah took decisive action in destroying idolatry and those who promoted it. Conviction without action would have been the height of hypocrisy for both the king and the people. The public renewal of the covenant necessitated sweeping temple reform. Overnight, Manasseh's embrace of all things pagan, including his tolerance for religious pluralism, his encouragement of the surrounding culture's sexual rituals and his inclusiveness of the pantheon of ethnic deities, faced rejection and destruction. Josiah had all the articles and objects used for honoring Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts removed from the temple. He tore down the quarters for the male prostitutes and all the trappings of the fertility cults. He desecrated Topheth (meaning 'incinerator') where children were sacrificed in a raging fire to Molech, a Canaanite deity. Symbols of power and success, such as horses and chariots dedicated to the sun, were destroyed, along with the high places dedicated to religious pluralism. It is hard to imagine the extent of degradation, depravity and superstition that occupied, not only the Jerusalem temple, but the minds of the people who claimed to be the children of Abraham. They worshiped sexual virility, material success, the sun and the stars, and a pantheon of cultural gods. Josiah tried with all his might to put an end to these evil practices. He even executed all the priests of the high places who had engaged in human sacrifices.

We would be foolish to think that idolatry is not a threat to our faith in Christ just because we do not have idols to Baal and Asherah poles in the sanctuary. Are we not tempted by the gods and goddesses of success and sex and the stars today as were those living in 7th century BC Jerusalem? Modern people do not burn incense to Baal, the master god of success, but they burn tens of billions of dollars in the hope that technology will save us. For many, space exploration is tantamount to the ancient Tower of Babel, a symbol of hope for the future of humankind. Like the ancients, moderns are consumed by their passion for sex. The insatiable drive for pleasure has replaced the focus on fertility, but our culture flaunts its total disregard for God's moral order just as it did in the days of Josiah. Millions look up to sex idols and down on the poor. Many Christian young people know the lyrics to numerous popular songs celebrating the ego and sex, but they don't know the words to one hymn of praise to God. Ancients dedicated their symbols of power, such as horses and chariots, to the sun, but our culture dedicates its symbols of success to the Self. Moderns bow before the spirit of sport. Is this not true in a society where a teacher can put in a 40 year career and not earn in his or her lifetime what a 24 year old football player receives in a signing bonus. Our society does not appease the gods by throwing babies into a fire, but our society appeases the Self by offering abortion on

request. By denying the Truth and believing in a Lie, modern culture embraces its own pantheon of secular and spiritual deities with the conviction that all gods are basically the same. So our culture is not that different from the culture that Josiah sought to reform.

The followers of the Lord Jesus Christ still face idolatry but they are commanded by the Lord to deal with it differently than the way king Josiah did. Under the terms of the old covenant Josiah was called of God to preserve the spiritual integrity of the nation. This meant literally smashing idols and executing priests who had perpetrated these sins against the nation. Josiah's tactics recall Joshua's orders to defeat the Canaanite tribes when Israel entered the Promised Land. God had chosen Israel, a small, insignificant nation, through which to bless the nations by revealing His commandments, and eventually by sending His Anointed One. Under the new covenant, Christ's followers are commanded to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. We are called to live and communicate the Gospel of grace with peace and love, not hate and violence. This Christ-honoring love however must not be misconstrued as appeasement or acquiescence. Instead of being taken "captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy," disciples of the Lord Jesus are to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (Colossians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 10:5). "We need to distinguish between the tolerant mind and the tolerant spirit," says John Stott. "Tolerant in spirit a Christian should always be, loving and understanding, forgiving and forbearing others...But how can we be tolerant in mind of what God has plainly revealed to be either evil or erroneous?" (Christ the Controversialist, 1972, 17). The challenge for disciples of Christ is to be in the world, but not of the world (John 17:16).

Josiah's third decisive action was to issue an order to all the people: "Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant" (2 Kings 23:21). This act of obedience and worship recalled the Exodus, when God rescued Abraham's descendants from bondage. The killing of the Passover lamb on the Day of Atonement communicated to Israel that they were not saved by obeying the Law, but by the mercy of God. By celebrating the Passover, Judah was reminded of God's great salvation history and we are reminded that the Passover looked forward to Christ our Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7). It was a singular moment in the life of Israel. The king led the nation in renewing the covenant. He instituted radical reforms and he called for a holy celebration of God's grace and mercy. The narrator of Kings could not have commended Josiah more highly:

"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 the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25; see Deut. 6:5).

Sadly, there is little evidence that Josiah’s leadership changed the culture of the nation. The vast majority of the people remained unrepentant and unchanged. Josiah’s heartfelt repentance, which led to renewal and reformation, gave the nation the benefit of true God-honoring leadership, but the people did not respond long-term. Their hearts were not in it and the changes imposed by Josiah were not embraced by the people. The reforms appear to have been short-lived and as soon as Josiah died the nation reverted to its old ways (2 Kings 23:29). The prophet Jeremiah was a contemporary of Josiah and began his ministry five years before the Book of the Law was discovered in the temple. Josiah faithfully renewed the old covenant, and the people did not follow his lead, but Jeremiah looked forward to the new covenant when God would write his law on people’s hearts so that they would embrace faithfulness and obedience with their heart, mind, strength and soul. That day has come and through the Spirit of Christ we have the promise of life-changing transformation. This is why the apostle Peter said, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). It is all the more inexcusable for us not to internalize the Word of God and to obey it wholeheartedly. By the wisdom of the Holy Spirit we are empowered to take in the Word of God and let our Lord and Savior transform every aspect of our lives.