

The Books of 1 and 2 Kings

Lesson 21: Manasseh's Sin and Josiah's Reforms -- 2 Kings 21:1–23:30

He was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned for fifty-five years. No other king of Judah sat on the throne longer. And no other king of Judah did more damage. Manasseh rebuilt every high place his father Hezekiah had torn down. He erected altars to Baal, carved an Asherah pole and set it up inside the temple, bowed before all the host of heaven, burned his own son as an offering, practiced fortune-telling and omens, and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood from one end to the other. The text says he led Judah to do more evil than the nations God had driven out before Israel. More evil than the Canaanites. More evil than the peoples whose wickedness had made the very land vomit them out. That is a staggering sentence, and the narrator means you to feel its weight.

What makes Manasseh so chilling is not merely what he did but how long he did it. Fifty-five years. That is long enough for a generation to grow up thinking this was normal. Long enough for the priests who served in a temple now housing an Asherah pole to forget what faithful worship ever looked like. Long enough for parents to raise children who would raise children who had never known Judah without its idols. The contagious power of leadership for evil is one of the darkest themes in the whole book of Kings, and Manasseh is its most terrible illustration.

Then comes Josiah, eight years old at his coronation. By the time he is sixteen he is seeking the God of his father David. By twenty-six he is repairing the temple, and from the rubble of renovation a scroll turns up, and a priest hands it to a secretary who reads it and takes it to the king, and when the king hears the words of the Book of the Law, he tears his robes. In that tearing of cloth is the whole hope of the lesson. The word of God, recovered and read aloud, pierced a king to the quick. It did what all the prophets' preaching could not seem to accomplish in the long Manasseh years: it broke a man's heart and bent him to his knees.

These three chapters ask you some of the most urgent questions in the whole Bible. What happens when a culture is led, year after year, into patterns of life that God calls evil? Can great personal repentance reverse damage done at a national scale? What power does the written word of God carry when it is actually read, heard, and obeyed? And what does it mean that even Josiah's magnificent reform could not finally turn away God's declared judgment against Judah because of Manasseh's sins? The answers the narrator gives are not comfortable. But they are true, and they are exactly what we need to hear.

Group Discussion: Manasseh reigned for fifty-five years and led Judah into deeper evil than the surrounding nations, while Josiah's reform swept through the land like a fire. What does this contrast between two kings tell us about the power of leadership, for good or for evil, over the people who follow?

Personal Reflection: When Josiah heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes in genuine grief and repentance. When you encounter a passage of Scripture that reveals a pattern of sin or disobedience in your life, what is your typical first response, and what would it look like for you to respond more like Josiah?

Read 2 Kings 21:1–23:30

Study Questions

1. Read 2 Kings 21:1–9. Manasseh is described as doing more evil than the nations God drove out before Israel, undoing every reform Hezekiah had made. What specific sins does the text name, and what does the combination of religious syncretism, child sacrifice, and the defilement of the temple itself reveal about how completely Manasseh had rejected the covenant with God?
2. Manasseh's evil did not stay private. The text says 'he seduced them to do more evil than the nations had done who the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel' (21:9). Think about the people in your own life who have the most influence over your spiritual direction, and people over whom you have influence. What does Manasseh's example warn you about the direction your influence is currently flowing?
3. Read 2 Kings 21:10–15. God's declaration of judgment through the prophets is specific and devastating: He will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish and turns it upside down. What does God's detailed explanation of the judgment reveal about His character, and why does a just God explain Himself rather than simply act?
4. God's patience with Manasseh's Judah spans decades before judgment falls. He sent prophets to warn, reason, and call the people back. Is there an area of your own life or your congregation's life where you sense that God has been sending warnings that have not yet been fully received? What would it mean to take those warnings seriously before the consequences arrive?

5. Read 2 Kings 22:1–13. During temple repairs commissioned by Josiah, the Book of the Law is found and read aloud to the king. What does the fact that the written word of God had apparently been lost, buried in the temple's rubble, tell us about what decades of unfaithful leadership can do to a people's relationship with Scripture, and what did Josiah's response to hearing it reveal about his heart?
6. Josiah had already begun seeking God before the Book of the Law was found, yet the reading of Scripture moved him to a depth of repentance his prior devotion had not reached. Have you ever had an experience where reading or hearing a specific passage of Scripture convicted you at a depth that surprised even you? What happened, and what did it change?
7. Read 2 Kings 22:14–20 and 23:1–3. The prophetess Huldah confirms both the judgment on Judah and the personal mercy shown to Josiah because his heart was tender and he humbled himself before God. Then Josiah gathers all the people and reads the entire Book of the Covenant to them publicly, and they make a solemn covenant before the LORD. What does this sequence reveal about the relationship between hearing God's word, genuine repentance, and covenant renewal as a community?
8. Josiah's repentance was not merely private and internal. He read the law publicly, gathered the whole community, and led them into a corporate covenant renewal. Are there ways in which your own repentance tends to stay private and interior when it should also take a public, communal, or relational shape? What would that look like in your current situation?
9. Read 2 Kings 23:4–25 and then 23:26–27. Josiah's reform is described as unprecedented: no king before or after him turned to the LORD with all his heart, all his soul, and all his might as the Law of Moses commanded. And yet the very next verses announce that the LORD's

wrath did not turn away from Judah because of all that Manasseh had provoked Him to. What does this passage teach us about the authority and reforming power of God's written word when it is read and obeyed, and what does it teach us about the limits of even sincere human reform to undo the consequences of persistent national sin? How does this drive us toward the mercy and mediation of Christ as the only final answer to the problem of human sin?

10. Looking across the full sweep of 2 Kings 21–23, from Manasseh's unrelenting evil through Josiah's wholehearted but ultimately insufficient reform, name one truth about God's character or one specific call on your life that this passage has pressed into your heart, and describe one concrete step you will take this week in response.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Deuteronomy 17:18–20, where God commands the king to write a copy of the law and read it all his days, the pattern Josiah fulfills when the scroll is found; 2 Chronicles 34:1–35:19, the parallel account of Josiah's reform with additional detail about the great Passover; Jeremiah 7:1–15, a contemporary of Josiah who preached that temple ritual without heart obedience would not prevent judgment; Romans 15:4, affirming that everything written in former days was written for our instruction; Hebrews 4:12–13, declaring that the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit

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