

What's the Message – Lesson 64

Today we discover the last good king of Judah, and we witness the fall of Jerusalem.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is that you, O Lord will help us in our unbelief, help us that is, to learn to trust you completely, to put You first in our lives, and to obey You. Amen.

Last time we saw a study in contrasts, with a faithless king turning to a costly alliance instead of to God for help, followed by a son who was the exact opposite. But after Hezekiah died, starting with his son on the throne, things continued to go from bad to worse, with only one all-too-brief period under a good king.

The son of Hezekiah was Manasseh, and we find the account of his life in 2nd Kings chapter 21 and in 2nd Chronicles chapter 33. As we read there: *Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominable practice of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places which his father Hezekiah had broken down, and erected altars to the Baals, and made Asherahs, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them . . . Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they did more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.*

In spite of the prophets the Lord sent to Manasseh and the people, they gave no heed to what the Lord said, so the Lord used the King of Assyria – the very king they paid tribute to and were vassals of – to punish him by taking him to Babylon as a prisoner. Then we read in 2nd Chronicles chapter 33, verses 12 and 13: *When he was in distress he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to Him, and God received his entreaty and heard his supplication and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.*

In spite of Manasseh's attempt at repentance and a restoration of the worship of Yahweh, it wasn't until the fourth generation after Hezekiah that a thorough reform would take place. This happened under the last of the faithful kings of Judah, one by the name of Josiah. His story is told in 2nd Kings chapters 22 and 23, and in 2nd Chronicles chapters 34 and 35. It is said of Josiah: *He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right hand or the left.* His initial acts were straightforward, aimed at the most obvious sources of sin, and he purged Jerusalem and Judah of the idols, altars, and high places. In the 18th year of his reign, Josiah commanded that the Temple of the Lord be repaired, and while this work was going on, a priest found the book of the law of the Lord given through Moses.

When it was read to Josiah, he rent his clothes as a sign of grief. He realized that his nation had not followed the words of the law and were guilty in God's eyes, so he gathered the people together and read to them the words of the book that had been found. And they all made a covenant to keep the Lord's commandments with all their heart and soul.

Then with a zealot's fire, the purge of Josiah was extended into the territory of the northern tribes, followed by a cleansing of the priests and Levites, and the most complete and joyous keeping of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread since the time of Samuel was conducted. It would seem that religious reform had been firmly established throughout the land.

But international events took over. The power of Assyria had been replaced by the power of Babylonia. Pharaoh Necho saw this as an opportunity to re-establish the position of Egypt, and decided to attack the army of Babylon. Josiah thought this was not in the best interest of Judah and attempted to stop Pharaoh Necho en route, but Josiah was killed in the battle. For a brief time Judah became a vassal of Egypt, and it was Egypt who decided who would rule Jerusalem. It was not to last, however, for Necho was soundly defeated by the man who would soon become King Nebuchadnezzar. The result was that Judah then became a vassal of Babylon, and it was Babylon who appointed a ruler of Judah.

In short order the last four rulers of Judah – two of which only ruled for about three months – saw the kingdom crumble completely as the Lord had declared, and in 586 B.C., Jerusalem fell to the power of Nebuchadnezzar and the most able of the people were carried away to captivity in Babylon. With that Teacher, we come to the end of the Divided Kingdom of Israel. True, it is fascinating history, but what does it mean to us today? Teacher, what's the message for us?

Ask yourself this question: "What lesson has the Lord been trying to teach the Children of Israel, not just during the time of the divided kingdom, but from the very beginning?" Have we not said, many, many times, that God wants us to trust Him? And so He gave the Patriarchs, then Moses signs of His power so that they would know that He would do exactly what He said. In other words, we can be confident that we can put our trust in Him . . . completely . . . in every situation . . . because He has kept His word . . . kept all of His promises to His people. This complete trust is given the term "faith" in the New Testament Church. And because we have such faith in God, we obey His laws and commands. In this sense, faith and obedience go hand in hand. One cannot be without the other.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in the second chapter of **The Cost of Discipleship**: *only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes . . . For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.*

Isn't this the lesson the Lord had been trying to teach Israel for centuries? Trust me, God said over and over. Walk with Me, and obey my laws and all will be well with you. Did they ever learn it? Have we?

Next time we will begin the study of Unit Five, Lessons from the Prophets.