

ROYAL INTRODUCTIONS

Kings of the Past Who Point Us to the True King

MANASSEH: The Point of No Return

(2 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20)

By Ron Clegg, Assoc. Pastor for Discipleship

There were many sad days in the history of Jerusalem. The day the city was destroyed by the Babylonians is at the top of the list. Close behind was the day that Hezekiah, probably the best king Jerusalem ever saw other than David, died, which was also the day that the worst king Jerusalem ever saw took the throne, a son of Hezekiah named Manasseh. And what made this day even worse is that the worst king would reign over Jerusalem longer than any other. It was a reign from which Jerusalem never recovered.

We are not given that much information about particular events in Manasseh's time, especially in light of the length of his reign, which was 55 years. A lot could happen in that much time. We are also given two different perspectives in Kings and Chronicles, which requires us to read both accounts in order to get the whole story. The writer of Kings without qualification places the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the Jews to Babylon squarely on Manasseh's shoulders. In fact, from 2 Kings 20 through 24, the writer says three times, making sure we don't miss this point, that Manasseh is held accountable for Jerusalem's destruction. He was so utterly bad as a ruler, his reign became the point of no return for Yahweh's judgment. And in Kings, that is where the story sadly ends. Chronicles does not paint over Manasseh's evil at all, but that writer brings out a different ending to his story that will be the true bright spot in this study. So, it is time to enter this ancient tragedy.

It is hard to understand how it was possible for this situation to develop. Manasseh was the son of Hezekiah, the bright and shining star of Judean kings. Hezekiah was faithful all his life to Yahweh. He transformed the idolatrous nation Judah had become under Ahaz into a people who worshipped Yahweh alone. His reforms went deeper than those of any king that preceded him. Unlike some of his ancestors, he did not fall away late in his life. He was still human and therefore not perfect, but he was deeply faithful. So, how could such a faithful, believing father produce a son like Manasseh? If we ask that question, we will also have to ask how Hezekiah could have come from Ahaz, a king in the character of Manasseh. Maybe Hezekiah was not the best father. He obviously failed to pass along his faith commitments to his progeny. But, this also points to the limits we have as parents to guide the hearts of our children. We can shape and influence, but we cannot create righteous hearts in our children. Only the Spirit of God can do that, and it is clear that he didn't do that in Manasseh, at least when he was younger.

Manasseh becomes king at the age of 12. We get a graphic summary of his reign in **2 Kings 20** and **2 Chronicles 33**. The first nine verses of these passages are practically identical, with only slight variations. Like Ahaz, Manasseh set up pagan altars and pagan idols where the worship of Yahweh was to take place. He also offered his own sons as burnt offerings to these pagan idols. **2 Kings 20:16** brings out the depth of evil that he perpetrated. It says, **“Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.”** There are two things to note here. One is the amount of innocent blood that he shed. This puts him in the same league as King Herod and Stalin. So many people died unjustly at his hand that their blood is said to have **“filled Jerusalem from one end to another.”** Secondly, it was not just his own idolatry and evil. He led the people of Jerusalem to do the same. He set a pattern which the covenant people followed, and this went on for 55 years. Many of us struggle when we have a distasteful leader for four or even eight years. Imagine 55 years under the authority of a cruel, evil despot. This was Manasseh.

For this reason, the blame for the deportation was laid at his feet. There was just no comparison to what he did. The final description sums it up. In both accounts it is said that **“Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel” (2 Chronicles 33:9)**. As an act of divine judgment, Yahweh destroyed the seven Canaanite nations for their evil. Now His own people were even worse, all because of Manasseh. And His judgment on them would soon come. There would be no turning back God’s wrath.

If this was all we knew of Manasseh, we would be left with a sense of hopeless grief. But that is not the end of the story. **2 Chronicles 33:10-13** gives us something our heart longs for- redemption. Even here in this darkness, grace is at work. Manasseh had been warned time and time again by the prophets, but he simply turned a deaf ear. So, in a precursor to the coming deportation, the military leaders of Babylon came and captured Manasseh and took him to Babylon. How long he had to stay there we do not know, but it turned out to be a fruitful season. Now in chains and helplessly imprisoned by this foreign power, Manasseh prayed. **Vs.12** says, **“And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.”** Distress can be such a sweet gift, as it was here. When he prayed, Yahweh answered and restored him to his throne in Jerusalem, and even prospered him in the later years of his rule. **Vs.13** ends this part of his story with this description: **“Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.”** This is reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar’s confession in Daniel. Was Manasseh truly converted? Will we meet him in glory? It is hard to say how deep his repentance went, but he was a changed man afterward. He tried to undo much of the evil he had done, but the people were so deeply rooted in idolatry that they did not respond as he did.

So, what should we take away from this tragic story? First, this tells us how critically important is it for us to have godly leaders. The people of Jerusalem did not get to choose their king, but we do have the ability to raise up our leaders. A leader of idolatrous, immoral character has far more impact on us than we realize. Choosing

a leader is not simply a policy matter, it is also a character matter, a heart matter. Our leaders not only lead us by making policy, they lead us into their character bent. If a leader is idolatrous, then he/she will encourage us in that direction. If he/she is immoral, then they will encourage the same in their people. They might not specifically say those words, but a leader's demonstration of character preaches loudly and clearly. Therefore, we must be diligent in choosing leaders who we would want to emulate. That is difficult when our leaders are not often followers of Jesus, but we must still work towards that end if we want to be a healthy people.

Secondly, this tells us never to put our hope in human leaders. Sometimes we get a Hezekiah who acts and judges with righteousness. But even the best of leaders is only temporary. A new leader will follow, and maybe that leader will be another Manasseh. Our hope is not in the best of kings, but neither should we lose our hope under the worst. Our hope is in the true King who will never cease to reign over His Kingdom. He will never be deposed. He will never retire or get voted out. He is the eternal King.

Finally, this story really does have a message of hope. When the absolute worst can be moved to repentance and faith, then there is hope for anyone. There is hope for us, for our family members, for friends and enemies alike. The power of redemption is such that the deadest of the dead can be raised to new life and given a renewed hope of glory. God's grace is far more powerful than we often believe. We do have to see that repentance does not always cancel out the consequences of our sin. Even though Manasseh repented, Jerusalem was still the recipient of Yahweh's divine judgment at the hands of the Babylonian army. But though the temporal effects of sin might linger, our eternal hope of reunion with our Covenant God is firm and cannot be taken from us. We can be thankful for the story of Manasseh, because in it the light of the glory of the grace of Yahweh is very brightly displayed.