

King Josiah

Josiah was the last good king of Judah. After him three of his sons reigned, and one of his grandsons. None lasted very long; two reigned for just three months. Finally the people of Judah went into exile in Babylon. Although they returned about 70 years later they never had another king.

Josiah's reign seems like a chapter of missed opportunities. He was only 39 when he was killed in battle, although he had been king for 31 years. He introduced some excellent reforms in the nation, but very quickly after his death the nation forgot all about them, and reverted to their wicked ways. That may well have been because he led the way in everything and the people did what they were told to do but did not share their king's enthusiasm.

Promised and Promising

Josiah is one of the seven men in the Bible who are named well before they were born. Josiah's birth was prophesied in the reign of Jeroboam I, about 300 years before he was born. "Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name" (1 Kings 13:2). Josiah, son of Amon, became king at the age of eight, when his wicked father was overthrown. His mother's name was Jedidah, but little else is known about her except where she came from. Was she the good influence in the young king's life? Presumably there was someone who provided such, because we are told that "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the way

of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left" (2 Kings 22:2).

When he had reigned for 18 years, Josiah began to institute reforms. He sent a messenger, Shaphan the scribe, to Hilkiah the High Priest to arrange for the temple to be repaired and cleaned. In the reigns of the two predominantly wicked kings before him – Manasseh and Amon – it had become neglected, dirty and in disrepair. In the process of setting things back to rights, Hilkiah found a scroll described as "the book of the Law". He gave this to Shaphan, who read it. It is extremely unlikely that Hilkiah was unable to read, but quite possible that his eyes were unable to see the text on the scroll. I am not quite sure exactly which book is described. It could have been Leviticus, or more likely a scroll of Deuteronomy, perhaps the original copy (see Deuteronomy 31:26).

Reforming Zeal

When Shaphan and Hilkiah had read it they took it to King Josiah, and read it to him. The effect was electric: the king tore his clothes, realizing that the book condemned much of the life of the nation, despite his best intentions. He was now even more determined in his zeal to bring the people back to the true worship of the LORD God for he recognized the danger the nation were in if they ignored the word of the living God:

"Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has

been found. For great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us" (2 Kings 22:13).

If there is one thing we should learn from Josiah it is the need to read God's word for ourselves, to take note of what it teaches and put it into action in our own lives. Fortunately Josiah had godly men and women amongst his advisors and counselors, one of them was Huldah, the prophetess, the wife of Shallum. She sent messengers back to Josiah with the message that evil would come to the nation, but that because Josiah had sought to obey God's word the judgment would not come in his time.

"Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place" (v 20).

Second Reformation

A period of intense activity followed. Josiah now made a determined effort to remove all vestiges of idol worship from the land and to bring the people back to the true worship of the Lord God. The most obvious sign of this was the keeping of the Passover. The people should have kept the Passover each year on the anniversary of the nation leaving Egypt (Exodus 13:10). The Passover kept in Josiah's time was unparalleled.

No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet. None of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah, and the priests and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of

Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 35:18).

It was a very joyful time for the nation. They remembered their redemption from slavery in Egypt, and also the happiness of a return to godly ways. Sadly it did not last.

Early End

Nothing further is recorded about Josiah until the thirty-first year of his reign. Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt was on his way to fight against the Assyrians at Carchemish. He sent a message to Josiah saying that he had no quarrel with him, nor with Judah, and that God had commanded him to make haste to battle at Carchemish, but undeterred Josiah went out with his army to fight in the plain of Megiddo. Like another king before him he was struck by a stray arrow, and was mortally wounded.

It was a tragic loss, for the reforms he had begun were not sufficiently embedded in the lives of the people to survive his death. Jeremiah the prophet was one of the foremost to lament his death:

"Weep not for him who is dead, nor grieve for him, but weep bitterly for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land" (22:10).

The world is full of "what ifs" and it is tempting to ask "What if Josiah had not intervened with Neco, would the effect on Judah have been very different?" It is impossible to answer that, because what happened was part of God's plan. The time for Judah to be restored fully was not yet. That has to await the coming of the Lord Jesus.

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Quotations from the ESV