

Lessons from Josiah – the Restorer King

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Introduction

Josiah, the sixteenth king of Judah after Israel divided, began to reign at the extremely young age of eight years. His father and grandfather before him were wicked and idolatrous, whose influences he rejected. Instead, he instituted a great restoration of true worship and service of Jehovah. He was a remarkable man and monarch by any measurement. His life and reign constituted the last blaze of glory for his doomed nation. With his premature death at the age of thirty-nine, Judah's last gasp of life as a nation expired, and God's promised judgments soon came upon her. Only three years later, Nebuchadnezzar invaded and conquered the decadent nation, marking the beginning of Judah's 70 years of Babylonian captivity.

Josiah was a unique king in Judah – a bright light and blessed memory in an otherwise dark and dismal history of a nation that God desired to give His choicest blessings. He was exemplary in many virtues, and consequently his life holds important lessons for us who live some 26 centuries hence.

Young People Can Exert Powerful Influence for Good

Josiah was extremely young when he became King of Judah, and he set his course early: "In the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young [sixteen], he began to seek after the God of David his father..." (2 Chr. 34:3). He began his earnest assault upon idolatry at age twenty. By the age of twenty-six he had eradicated idolatry in both Judah and Israel and restored the true worship of God (v. 33; 35:18-19). His influence for good in his youth is incalculable.

We need to teach children that they can and should wield a powerful influence for good, even at an early age. This fact is seen in Timothy, who from a child had been taught God's Word and who had readily followed it (2 Tim. 3:15). Some estimate that he was only fifteen years old when he became the companion of Paul and Silas in their Gospel adventures (Acts 16:1-2). Paul described him as still a "youth" in his first letter to him (1 Tim. 4:12), yet he had already attained a remarkable influence among the congregations and was so valued by Paul that he left him in Ephesus to withstand the efforts of false teachers there (1:1-3).

Young people must understand that "peer pressure" can work both ways – for good as well as for evil. We who are older need to help them see the powerful influence for good they can be if they faithfully serve God.

We Do Not Have to Emulate Our Evil Predecessors

Josiah had a heritage of great moral and religious evil in his grandfather, Manasseh, and his father, Amon. The former had been so wicked that God allowed him to be taken to Assyria in chains. His zeal for the Canaanite gods outdid the Canaanites themselves (2 Chr. 33:9). Although he eventually repented and tried to undo some of his evils, he was unable to overcome the evil he had already caused. Amon had no redeeming qualities. He re-established all of the idolatry his father had rejected late in life. One would expect Amon's son to follow in the course of his father, but he turned away from it completely.

Many blame evil or erroneous behavior upon dysfunctional family life or other sociological factors. If ever a child had such an excuse, Josiah did. While God does not will that children grow up under wicked parents (Eph. 6:1-4), Josiah proves that one can do what is right in spite of this serious handicap. Without argument, one has more to overcome in such a situation, but again, Josiah proves that it can be done.

This principle also applies to those who were reared in religious error. In fact, it especially relates to Josiah, for it was chiefly for their religious corruption that both Manasseh and Amon are remembered. It is not uncommon to teach someone the Truth, only to hear him or her say, "My mother and father were members of the _____ Church and I would show disrespect for them if I obeyed the Gospel." Thankfully, Josiah did not reason thus about the religion of his father!

A favorite ploy of the sociologists is to blame all misconduct on "society" rather than holding the lawbreaker and pervert accountable for his evil conduct. Contrariwise, millions of decent, hardworking, and prosperous citizens came from terrible environments. Likewise, thousands of saints grew up in terribly wicked home environments and/or in surroundings of religious error, but they overcame such to become stalwart servants of Christ. One who learns better but will not do what is right because of family loyalties or childhood environment, is simply unwilling to accept personal responsibility. The life of Josiah proves that one can come from an environment that is conducive to evil and error and still be what God would have him to be.

The Law of God Alone Is Authoritative in Religion

When Shaphan read to Josiah the law of God which Hilkiyah discovered in the temple, he was fear-struck (2 Chr. 34:19). The young king knew that most of his predecessors had not

followed God's law (v. 21). He knew that it alone revealed what pleases God. He knew that Judah was practicing what it prohibited and did not authorize (e.g., idolatry) and that it had long neglected what it demanded (e.g., keeping the Passover). Once it was confirmed that the book was indeed the law of God and that what it promised and threatened would happen, Josiah manifested unquestioning obedience to it.

Our world needs so desperately to learn this lesson. The ideas and words of men in religion and morals are not authoritative. Religion based on human doctrines is vain: "But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (Mat. 15:9). Those outside the body of Christ who claim to believe in Christ are hopelessly divided because they are unwilling to accept the Word of Christ as their sole authority in religion, or if accepting it as such, they mishandle it (2 Tim. 2:15). The same factors are a principal cause of divisions among brethren, also.

Many in the church need to relearn this lesson, if they ever learned it. The law of Christ is the sole authority in religion, and we sin when we practice that which it does not authorize. Our nineteenth-century forefathers in the Faith understood this fundamental truth. By applying it they themselves escaped, and helped multiplied thousands of others to escape, the labyrinth of false religion. If we do not have Bible authority for everything we say and do, we had better not say or do it: "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him" (Col. 3:17).

When True Religion Has Been Corrupted, It Must Be Restored

Josiah was wise enough to perceive this necessity. For this reason, he embarked on a resolute course of destroying idolatry and restoring true worship. That there is one God demands the conclusion that there is one true religion. The corruptions of religion in the days of Josiah cried out for restoration of the true religion. He had learned enough of the law of Moses and the history of God's people even before the discovery of the book of the law in the temple that he knew he could not be faithful to God without beginning a movement to restore true religion (2 Chr. 34:3ff). The discovery of the book further encouraged his zeal in this respect (2 Kin. 23:1ff). One who believes in God and comes to a knowledge of the Truth cannot think or act otherwise and be logically or Scripturally consistent.

When true lovers of God look at the multitude of pagan religions with billions of devotees, and then when they observe the thousands of religious groups that claim to be part of

“the church,” they cannot be content. The attitude of so many who profess belief in the God of the Bible is that the sincere Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist is likely in no danger of being lost. Even more widespread is the view that, if one believes in Christ in any degree, nothing else matters. The spark of every movement to restore true religion has been the conviction that God has but one religion. Jesus had in mind His soon-to-be-established church when He spoke the following:

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

God has directed men to worship Him with the attitude and in the way He has revealed, and man is obligated to comply. Notice that Jesus plainly stated that God seeks “true worshippers,” that is, those who will worship Him as He has ordained.

God cannot be pleased with mere form and ritual (Mat. 6:1-7) nor with humanly authorized practices (15:9). Religion that is not based on Truth is unacceptable, regardless of the sincerity of the devotee (Acts 10:1-6; Rom. 10:2-3). Ephesians 4:5-6 states that just as there is “one God,” there is also “one faith” (i.e., “the faith,” the Gospel Truth and the religion based upon it [Acts 6:7; Eph. 4:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 3; et al.]).

It was this incontrovertible principle that drove our spiritual pioneers of almost two hundred years ago to ring forth the clarion call to their friends, neighbors, and kindred to come out of their corrupt sects into the old paths of Truth and righteousness in a great restoration of true religion. It is sad that many in the church are now malevolent toward any such appeal. Such have joined the ranks of those who look upon the church of our Lord as merely another denomination in their pluralistic view of religion. They have a bold counter-restoration agenda aimed at aping all the trappings of pseudo-religion that the restoration principle has helped millions escape.

Almost as destructive to true religion as these are those who have “stuck their heads in the sand” in their posture of digression-denial that is rampant. To them, one can not teach anything blasphemous enough to deserve exposure as a false teacher. Whatever errors they may hear preached or see practiced, monkey-like, they are determined to “see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil.” While admirable in ordinary circumstances, in the face of criminal behavior these traits become sinful. What some are doing to the Lord’s bride today constitutes religious rape and murder. The great damage they are doing to the church of Christ is beyond

that which assaults from without could have done. Just as Josiah's restoration effort was conducted among the people of God, so must we wage a similar effort in the church to salvage as many as possible from the severe encroachments of error. Let us never relent in our cry for true religion, both within and without the kingdom.

Restoration Involves Tearing Down False Religion

Josiah understood that the true religion of God could not be restored without destroying the false religious practices among His people. Thus his first work of restoration was to destroy the false religions (2 Chr. 34:3-7, 33).

This same necessary procedure was followed by the restorers of the early nineteenth century. Alexander Campbell's first monthly publication, *The Christian Baptist*, begun in 1835, was strongly iconoclastic. He and others who were heralding the plea for restoration knew that the errors, innovations, and traditions that had combined to corrupt what was called "Christianity" in their day had to be cleared away before restoration of the true doctrine and practice could be accomplished. God had commissioned Jeremiah, Josiah's contemporary, to follow this very plan. He was "...to pluck up and to break down and to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10b). The need for this strategy remains. Men will not and cannot appreciate the Truth until they have been made dissatisfied with their errors.

Restoration Involves Positively Setting True Religion in Place

After Josiah had spent six years expelling idolatry from Judah and Israel, he then publicly committed himself to God that he would keep His "commandments...with all his heart, and with all his soul..." (2 Chr. 34:3; 30-31). He then reinstated the Passover (35:19). The necessary order of events in restoring anything is: (1) Remove the corrupt elements; (2) Set in place the original order. This is the way the early restorers worked. They did not stop with their work of demolishing error, nor was this an end within itself. Their ultimate goal was the re-establishment of pure, primitive Christianity to replace the errors being practiced.

Likewise, we must set forth New Testament Christianity so that men may see the beauty and simplicity of the distinctive, undenominational, unsectarian church of Christ. They need to understand the work and worship of the church and the simple plan of salvation. They need to see in His children (in both our doctrine and practice) the Lord's will for purity of daily life.

Every Generation Has an Obligation to Maintain That Which Has Been Restored

As long as Josiah was on the throne, his restoration movement was honored by the people: "And all his days they departed not from following the Lord, the God of their fathers" (2 Chr. 34:33b). Sad to say, his restoration of true religion died with him. His son, Jehoahaz, succeeded him: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done" (2 Kin. 23:32). The same description fits the evil reigns of Jehoikim, who succeeded Jehoahaz (v. 37), and of Jehoichin, who succeeded Jehoikim (24:9). Josiah understood his obligation to be faithful to God in his generation, but his sons felt no such obligation and reverted to the evils of those before their father.

The foregoing record well illustrates the fact that the people of God in any age are always only one generation away from apostasy. When a generation decides that it has "outgrown" the Gospel and its obligation to be faithful to God, it soon squanders all of the sacrificial efforts of preceding generations. A greater and more unnecessary tragedy can hardly be imagined. It is being seen in many in the church nowadays. Some among the older generation are now denying the Truth they once boldly and ably affirmed and lived. Many of the younger generation either know not the price paid by so many over the past two centuries to restore the New Testament church, or knowing, they care not. They are watching gleefully as congregation after congregation slips perceptibly into the stagnant cesspool of denominationalism, and some are pushing and shoving with all their might to hasten the slide. What a heavy burden of guilt they must bear to The Judgment if they do not repent!

God can hardly be more pleased with such saints today than He was with the bulk of the apostate kings of Judah (and Israel) and those who followed their wicked leadership. Let godly parents and grandparents do their utmost to instill in their posterity the feeling of obligation to love, promote, and defend the Truth of God with their very lives and to pass it on to their children. Only when each generation feels the obligation to be faithful with the Truth placed in its hands can the restored church be maintained without interruption of corruption.

Conclusion

After studying the history of Josiah's good life and his heroic restoration efforts, we should not be surprised that the inspired historians awarded him the following accolades:

And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left...; And like unto him was there no king

before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him (2 Kin. 22:2; 23:25).

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the September 2004 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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