

8. Playing with fire

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[0 : 01] Now, before we come to this passage, 2 Kings 21, let's have a moment of prayer. God our Father, how we praise you for your word, how we love it when it speaks in the language of encouragement, how it strengthens our hearts and makes us rejoice.

We realize often that it speaks to us in the language of warning, in the language of telling us how not to go, and we need to hear that as well.

So we pray now that your gracious spirit will take these words written long ago, but written for us now, and use them indeed to build us up and to challenge us and to set us more firmly in the way of your truth, to walk with you all the days of our lives.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. And so if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 328.

The great Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, who spoke to enormous crowds in 19th century London and did tremendous work for the Gospel, tells of how in his earlier days he was preaching in the Fenlands in a little tin chapel on a Sunday afternoon.

[1 : 30] Those were robust days when people went to church three times on a Sunday. But anyway, Spurgeon was preaching there, and it was a very, very hot day, and a tin tabernacle was not the best place to keep awake.

And he says in his journal, in the front row there was a large red-faced farmer, and the heat of the day and the roast beef worked mightily upon him, and he began to snore.

Spurgeon was not the kind of man to put up with anything like that. So he stopped his sermon and shouted, Fire! Fire! Fire! And the farmer woke up and said, Where is the fire?

In hell, replied Spurgeon. For sinners who slumber when the Saviour is presented to them. A wake-up call. And surely, 2 Kings 21 is a wake-up call.

We've been enormously encouraged, at least I've been enormously encouraged, by the story of Hezekiah, of God's great deliverance of his tremendous faith, his very human weaknesses, which nevertheless did not destroy his standing as a man of God.

[2 : 45] But we need warning, as well as encouragement. A diet of nothing but encouragement makes us complacent. It makes us feel we've made it.

It makes us feel there is nothing more we need to do. There is nothing we need to keep our eyes open for. And the New Testament tells us why the Old Testament stories were written.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says, These were written for an example, set down for our instruction, so that we would not turn away from God the way that they did.

And so here, although he's talking about the Exodus wanderings, about the people turning away from God, it clearly applies to a passage like this. Don't do what Manasseh, king of Judah, did.

And the author of Hebrews says this, Take care of an evil and unbelieving heart, leading us to fall away from the living God. And that's what this chapter is about, an evil and unbelieving heart, that turns away from the living God.

[3 : 49] And the author of Hebrews also tells us that our God is a consuming fire. That's why I've called this sermon, Playing with Fire. That is what King Manasseh was doing.

Setting himself up against the blazing holiness of God. Setting himself up against the God whose purity burns like a fire. So, this chapter is, Willie talks about necessary negatives.

This chapter is one of those necessary negatives. Don't be like this. Don't do this. But just a quick word about Manasseh himself, before we look at the chapter.

We're told that he was 12 years old when he began to reign. Almost certainly, when you look at the dates, he didn't reign on his own from the age of 12.

But he was co-regent with his father probably for 10 years. So he's 22 before he took over the kingdom. That's very important because it means that he was on the throne when his father was still reigning.

[4 : 55] It reminds us that the advances of one generation can totally be lost by another. Remember, the church is only ever one generation away from extinction.

What's gained by one generation can easily be lost by another. So he reigns for 55 dreadful years, plus two ineffective years by his son.

In other words, for nearly 60 years, godless, evil living kings reign over God's people. And this is a mystery, isn't it? Why did God allow it?

Now I'm sure we've often asked these kind of questions about the state of the church in our land. People have said, we've never imagined the kind of things that are happening in the church. Could ever have happened.

These are the kind of things that are being advocated, permitted and even gloried in. It's a mystery of God's problems. Why did God allow this godless, dishonoring, cruel and debauched man to reign over his people for nearly 60 years?

[5 : 58] It's a mystery of God's ways. And indeed, it can be seen as the beginning of God's judgment. This very reign itself is the beginning of God's judgment. So let's look at the chapter then as it develops in three movements.

It doesn't have the strong narrative interest of Hezekiah either, but it's tremendously important things to say. First of all, we have deliberate unfaithfulness in verses 1 to 9.

The first act of the story, if you like. Now we're given no reason for Manasseh's godliness. The author does not tell us why he became like this or why he did these things.

It's a reminder that faith is not inherited. It's a reminder that we do not gain faith from our parents by osmosis. We don't gain faith from godly leaders or gospel churches simply by being there.

It's a reminder that there have to be personal choices made. But I think there are one or two glimpses throughout which show us what's happening. Deliberate unfaithfulness first shown by deliberate destruction of his father's work.

[7 : 09] Verse 3, he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed. I wonder if there's a little hint there of what's been happening.

I'm pretty certain there would be an anti-Hezekiah party among the upper echelons in Judah who did not necessarily like the sweeping away of pagan religion, which of course is a far more comfortable and convenient and unchallenging religion to have.

And when Hezekiah gets rid of all this clutter, you could imagine many people were less than thrilled. And it's very likely that Manasseh exploits that.

Manasseh exploits that and deliberately undoes what his father had done. And notice of course verse 9, they did not listen and Manasseh led them astray.

This is not just the king, the people are actually following him. Now it's all very well to say they couldn't do anything else. That's simply not true. The emphasis here is that they had bad leadership, but that bad leadership was warmly embraced.

[8 : 16] It's very interesting, isn't it? He destroys the high places and probably says we need something new and innovative. The problem is, when you hear people preaching heresy, very far from being new and exciting, it's usually a recycling of old heresies that have been in the church from the very beginning.

Twenty years ago or so, when we went to Durham, the notorious David Jenkins, then Bishop of Durham, used every Easter to make statements about the resurrection, which he claimed were fresh and new and exciting ways of looking at the resurrection.

They're exactly the heresies that were plaguing the early church in the first century. Gnosticism saying that the body is evil and the spirit is good. And what happened really was a spiritual resurrection.

Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead. And this was seen as new and exciting. And in fact, just simply a recycling of old heresies. The deliberate, in other words, destruction and turning his back on his father's work.

But also, there is a rejection of covenant relationship with the Lord. When you come across this word, Lord or Yahweh, this is the God who makes a covenant with his people.

[9 : 29] A God who is married to his people. It's interesting, in verses 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9, the name Yahweh is mentioned. We saw this with Ahaz some weeks ago.

It's important to say this again. Before Manasseh disobeyed the law of God, he turned his heart away from the Lord. He rejected the covenant relationship with him.

And this almost always is the way that idolatry and unbelief begins. If you talk to somebody who's gone away from the Lord, well, there's always intellectual reasons that can be given.

There's always arguments for it. But more often than not, nearly always, you find there is something in that person's life which they know dishonors God.

And they're determined to hold on to it. This is what's happening here. Manasseh wanted to live in his brave new world. He wanted to live without the Decalogue, without the Ten Commandments.

[10 : 32] We'll come back to that. And the ultimate disloyalty, verse 3, He made an Asherah, as Ahab, king of Israel, had done. No greater possible condemnation of a king of Judah could be made than this, as Ahab, king of Israel, had done.

This is Judah's Ahab. If Hezekiah is David, come again. Manasseh is Ahab, come again. And that's pretty devastating. The Asherah pole is a symbol of the goddess of fertility who was worshipped with uninhibited, debauched orgies.

And notice, he goes even further than Ahab. He built altars in the house of the Lord, which the Lord had said in Jerusalem, that's verse 4, I will put my name.

And then in verse 7, the card image of Asherah that he had made, he set exactly the same word, in the house of the Lord. You see what's happening here. It's not just being unfaithful to Yahweh.

It's not even as if he has a mistress. He's actually bringing the mistress into the family home. That underlines the seriousness of it. This is what Vanessa has done. A man who has so totally turned away from any relationship with the Lord that he is dishonouring the place where Yahweh has placed his name.

[11 : 56] Deliberate rejection of his father's work. Turning away from loyalty. He did not love the Lord. It wasn't just he disobeyed him. He didn't love him. And then, he didn't trust the Lord.

Now, let me explain what I mean by that. The theme that's run through the stories of Hezekiah and Ahaz before him is the theme of trust. The theme of faith. Who do we believe in?

Who do we follow? Whose word counts for us? Ahaz trusted the king of Assyria. Hezekiah, we are told, trusted in the Lord.

What does Ahaz trust in? He trusts pagan religion. Because this is all about control. There is verse 6, using fortune telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with wizards.

Fortune telling the occult. All these sort of things. In an attempt to manipulate the future. Attempt to control the future. And that's what Manasseh is trusting him.

[12 : 55] And notice, he worshipped all the hosts of heaven. Verse 3. And served them. The Lord who made heaven and earth, he no longer trusts.

The Lord of hosts is no longer the Lord of hosts. He's simply a godlet among the hosts. Simply another one of those godlets. And he has a concert.

Asherah, the fertility goddess. You can see how totally and completely Manasseh has turned the covenant faith of Israel on its head. And if that weren't bad enough, verse 6, he burned his son as an offering.

Cruelty beyond, almost beyond belief. And we remember Paul's seething condemnation of human sin in Romans chapter 1.

And one of the things he says is they are without natural affection. Manasseh is without natural affection. And then part of that deliberate unfaithfulness is rejecting the word of God.

[14 : 00] Verse 8. I have commanded them according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them. Read through Deuteronomy. Read through chapters 11 and 12, perhaps particularly.

And you'll find he is doing the very things that Moses had commanded not to be done. And Moses had warned, don't behave like the inhabitants of the land you're going to.

The land will vomit you out. These are the words that are used. These are the words that, and this is what's going to happen. Because he, notice verse 9, he did more evil than the nations had done. Isn't it true that those who come from a godly background, those who have known the advantages of a godly background, can do far, far more harm than those who had never known it.

Because there is this deliberate unfaithfulness, deliberate rejection. And later on in verse 10, he said, by his servants, the prophets. We're not told which specific prophets, but Isaiah is possibly still around at this time.

[15:04] We'll come back to Isaiah in a moment. Manasseh did not simply ignore the word of God. He rejected it. He suppressed it. And indeed, almost certainly got rid of the scrolls of the Torah, the scrolls of Moses.

They did not listen, verse 9. Isn't that where all our present confusion and unbelief comes from? They did not listen. And listen in the true biblical sense means actually taking on board, understanding and acting upon.

The biblical capital of early generations soon becomes exhausted and we lapse back into biblical and unbiblical ways. And we claim they're liberating.

We look around today and we see empty churches, which is what liberalism produces. There is no gospel and therefore people don't come because there's nothing to come for.

And so Manasseh, king of Israel, the first thing about him is deliberate unfaithfulness. Now the second thing, coming on to verses 10 to 16, deliberate unfaithfulness is going to be answered by devastating judgment.

[16:19] The Lord said by his servants, the prophets, verse 10, because Manasseh, king of Judah, has committed these abominations and done more evil than all that the Amorites did who were before him.

The Amorites is sometimes a collective name used for the nations who inhabited the land before the Lord God's people came and also made Judah to sin with his idols.

Therefore, thus says Yahweh, God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah disaster. And this is going to be spectacular judgment, first of all.

There are three pictures used in verses 12 and 13 of this judgment. First of all, the ears of everyone who hears it will tingle, verse 12. In other words, it will be such a sensational judgment that when people hear it, almost as if their ears were hurting hearing it because it's going to be so terrifying and so awful.

Then there is the image of the plumb line. I will stretch over Jerusalem, the measuring line of Samaria. Remember, Samaria, the northern kingdom, had already gone into exile into Assyria.

[17:25] And the divine builder is stretching out the plumb line over Jerusalem. An image that Amos the prophet uses, the Lord standing with his plumb line and finding the kingdom has gone totally astray.

The inevitability here. And then the totality of the judgment. I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

Why do we wipe a dish? Because it's dirty, it's filthy. That's what's going to happen here. The dirt and filth of Jerusalem are going to be cleared away completely.

And this is not just Manasseh. Verse 15. Because they have done evil in my sight, they have provoked me to anger. Since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day.

Remember, unless there is true obedience to the word of God, this is going to happen over and over and over again.

[18:25] That's why you need words of warning. Because one of the things a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change. False prophets will always be affirming, always saying to people they're great, they're fine, they're doing well.

But they will never say to people that they need to change. No, we are human. We get it wrong. There's always going to be a need for the message of change, the message of warning, the message of judgment.

And we learn here too, there is more than idolatry, there is violence and cruelty. Verse 16.

Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another.

Now, a man who burns his own son as an offering is not likely to be very careful of the lives of others or very scrupulous about how he behaves.

And it's fascinating that one of the reasons given back in Genesis for the destruction of the human race is that the earth was filled with violence. When a society becomes filled with violence, then that society is a dangerous state.

[19 : 34] Because violence is a sign not only of rebelling against God, but it's a sign of total disregard for the image of God in humanity.

This phrase, innocent blood, is fascinating. These words are to be used centuries later by Judas about the death of Jesus.

I have betrayed innocent blood, he said, in that very city where Manasseh shed innocent blood from one end of the city to another.

And of course, the shedding of that innocent blood was both the culmination of the unbelief and idolatry and also the way that pointed to the forgiveness of it.

Till on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. The wrath of God is not yet satisfied on the people of Judah, though.

[20 : 31] The exile is to come. So we have deliberate unfaithfulness, which is answered by devastating judgment. And then the chapter closes with a dismal legacy.

Verses 17 to 26. The rest of the acts of Manasseh and all he did, and the sin that he committed. He was buried in the garden of his house, and the garden of Azah, and Ammon his son reigned in his place.

Now, if you read the parallel account of Manasseh in Chronicles, I think it's Chronicles 34 or 35, you'll find that the Chronicler adds a detail which the author of Kings doesn't.

The Chronicler tells us that towards the end of his reign, Manasseh was taken captive by the Assyrians and taken off to Babylon. Babylon was now growing in importance, of course, was going to gobble up Assyria shortly.

And we are told that in Babylon he came to his senses and repented and asked the Lord's forgiveness. And when he came back, he tried to undo some of the harm that he had done.

[21 : 41] And, of course, the question is, why does the author of Kings not mention this? And the author of Chronicles does. I think it's for this reason. The author of Chronicles is writing to the people about the time of Malachi, the very end of the Old Testament period.

People were returned from exile, but were disillusioned. The glowing prophecies of the desert blossoming as the rose, the nations streaming to Zion, didn't seem to have been fulfilled.

And therefore he's writing to encourage them. He's writing to encourage them. And remember, in the past, how God brought even the most godless people back to himself. On the other hand, Kings is writing to tell us why the exile happened.

Because of the disobedience to the word of God. But it's also a salutary reminder. It was far better that Manasseh repented than that he didn't. It was far better that he came in his last days to a kind of deathbed repentance.

But surely it reminds us that deathbed repentances don't usually lead to strong building up of faith among others. We'll see this in a moment in Ammon, his son.

[22 : 53] Ammon, his son, had seen years and years of disobedience and idolatry. And probably he's less than impressed by this deathbed repentance. What does build things up is steady, consistent godliness.

Not, of course, necessarily in the next generation, because as we saw, Manasseh totally turned against his father. And as far as the author of Kings is concerned, it was far too little and far too late. Hardly even worth a mention. And notice what he says. The rest of the acts of Manasseh versa and the sin that he committed. What is Manasseh remembered for?

He's remembered for one thing only. For the sin that he committed and for the sin that he caused others to do. The sin he made Judah to sin. Way back earlier in the story, Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who had actually become the king when the kingdom was split up, and Rehoboam, Solomon's son, in Judah, and Jeroboam in Israel.

Jeroboam is described as the king who made Israel to sin. Here is the king who made Judah to sin. He's a sinner and the cause of sin in others.

[24 : 08] Hezekiah's life is summed up, remember, emphasizing his faith, his godliness. And he also, those of you here the other week, will remember the bringing of water into Jerusalem.

He's defending the city against the Assyrians. So the first part of his dismal legacy is his sin, and the second part of his dismal legacy is his own son.

It was good that Manasseh repented. He couldn't undo the damage he had done. A lifetime of unbelief had had this effect on Ammon. But notice verse 20 about his son.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father has done. He walked in all the ways which his father had walked. In other words, this is deliberate choice. He doesn't just slip into it.

He deliberately chooses evil. And in particular, he abandoned the Lord, the God of his fathers. So, the legacy is truly dismal.

[25 : 13] The valley is truly dark. Oh, I wrestled this week wondering if I should jump on to chapter 22. But you can't understand what happens unless you come to terms with this passage.

And as we come to the end of the chapter, as we come to the end of probably the darkest tunnel in the whole of the book, there is a light shining.

God has not given up on his people. Verse 26, He was buried in the tomb in the Garden of Azzah, and Josiah, his son, reigned in his place.

So we're going to see you in a few weeks when we come back to this. Here, once again, almost at the end of the story, is going to shine a light that tells us that God is faithful to his covenant.

That God has not abandoned his people. That God is sending another David. Indeed, as we'll see, not just another David, another Moses. And this king is going to make a valiant attempt to undo the harm that his father and his grandfather had done.

[26 : 25] Don't ignore the warnings. Wake up to the wake-up call. But never, never despair of God's grace.

Amen. Let's pray. God our Father, we pray in the words of the prophet, that in anger, you will remember mercy.

We know that we are ripe for judgment. We know that individually, we know that collectively, we have followed other lords. We have gone our own way so often.

For God our Father, giving us a glimpse into this abyss, we pray that we may draw back from it. And with greater urgency, and with greater commitment, tread the way that will lead to life, and turn away from the way that will lead to destruction.

We ask this in the name of our gracious and victorious, Lord Jesus Christ himself. Amen.