

## 10. Zion down but not out!

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at page 330, and we'll have a moment of prayer together.

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you to receive the food of your holy word. And Father, we pray that as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our hearts and minds, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Those of you with good memories will remember I began this series on kings a long time ago, indeed almost two years ago, and we've been travelling through this terrain of one and two kings since then, and we've reached our final study in it.

Now, I want to ask you a question as we begin. Suppose we knew for certain that in our time, that is in the time of everybody here, including the youngest, that the decline of the church in this country and in the West would continue, that there would be no great revival, no great renewal, perhaps even steeper decline, perhaps even as has happened in some places and at some times, the virtual disappearance of the public witness to the Lord.

What would we do? I want to suggest to you that this chapter gives us the answer as to what we would do were that to happen. Josiah has been told by a prophetess called Huldah that his great reformation is going to fail.

[ 1 : 58 ] That the Lord is still going to judge Judah for the sins, particularly if his grandfather of Manasseh, there is going to be no revival. The many prayers for revival, including those of the prophet Habakkuk, who was almost certainly one of the influences on the young king, were not going to be answered in Josiah's time.

Habakkuk prays, revive your work, O Lord, in the midst of the years. In your anger, remember mercy. And what's the answer?

The answer is strikingly simple, but profound. We continue doing what is right. We continue obeying the word of the Lord.

We continue in prayer. We continue in serving him according to the word of the Lord, which is exactly what Josiah does here. See, in 22.16, just a page back, the Huldah the prophetess had said, thus says the Lord, whole I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants.

All the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. That's the book of Moses, especially the book of Deuteronomy, with its commands, its warnings, and its promises.

[ 3 : 12 ] And then again in our chapter, verse 26, the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath by which his anger was kindled against Judah.

And Josiah is followed by some dismal kings, and then comes the exile. Indeed, Josiah's own life ends downbeat.

What are we going to make of it? That's why what I'm saying tonight, I've given to it the heading, Zion down, but not out. This is a defeat for Zion.

This is a crushing defeat for Zion, but Zion is going to rise again. Zion, city of our God. So Zion down, but not out.

That's my title. I want to look at the chapter as it develops, really, in three particular waves. First of all, the king publicly renews his vows.

[ 4 : 06 ] 23.1-3, the public renewal of vows. You see, we've often noticed in these studies in kings, in these idolatrous kings like Manasseh, Ahaz, and others, that before they started to disobey God, their hearts had turned away from God.

They had fallen out of love with the Lord, and Josiah is bringing them back, almost like a renewal of marriage, a marriage that's gone sour, a marriage that's gone off the rails.

And the couple want publicly to renew their vows. That's what's happening here. You notice two things in verses 1-3. First of all, this is driven by the word of God.

The king went up to the house of the Lord, and then in the second part of verse 2, he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant. Notice all the words.

One of the things we've seen in our studies in kings is that the kings who get it wrong have a pick-and-mix attitude towards the word of God. We obey this bit, but not that bit.

[ 5 : 11 ] We often notice how true that is in our church, not least in our national church. We pick the parts of the Bible we like, usually those referring to love, which we then sentimentalize, and we use these to dismiss other parts of the Bible.

Nothing like that here. All the words. And that's a model for all of us. We have far more of the words than Josiah did, of course. We don't know how much else of the Bible had been written.

He certainly had the books of Moses, but we have the entire canon of Scripture. And notice what this is going to do. It governs lifestyle. Verse 3, walk after the Lord.

The word walk in Scripture usually means the whole lifestyle. Enoch walked with God, we are told. In other words, his whole lifestyle was governed and dominated by God.

And in all its rich variety, commandments, testimonies, and statutes. Commandments to keep him, if you like, on the straight way. The testimonies, the faithfulness of God revealed in the great deeds of the past.

[ 6 : 23 ] And statutes, the words of God enshrined in ways that could be remembered. It's not enough to have the word of God in our hands.

It's not enough to read the word of God, even. It's not enough to listen to preaching and read books about the Bible. All of these are important. I want you to notice, though, what else it says.

Verse 3, with all his heart and with all his soul. It has to do with love and commitment. It's not just reading it.

It's not just listening to sermons about it. It's actually doing it. And doing it, not out of a sense of duty, but out of a sense of love. That's why we sang that hymn some moments ago.

We have not loved you as we ought, nor learned your wisdom, grace, and power. And so-called revivals, or renewals, without the continual input of the word of God, soon fizzle out.

[ 7 : 26 ] So that's the first thing to notice about the public renewal of vows. It's a public commitment to the word of God. I want you to notice something else, more of the atmosphere of the verses.

This renews the nation's youth. In the late autumn, before winter comes and the nation collapses and disappears, there is something of the freshness of springtime here, renewing their honeymoon with the Lord.

The Old Testament prophets have so much to say about this. Isaiah particularly talks about the days of Israel's youth. Very tender phrase, first of all, when I taught Israel to walk.

Wonderfully tender phrase. And then also Israel as the bride who once loved him, but no longer does. So this is a public, communal, wholehearted recommitment to godliness.

This is a key moment in national history. And these happen from time to time. Back in the book of Joshua, in Joshua 24, before Joshua vows off the scene, he calls the nation to a public recommitment to the word of God and to the testimonies of Moses.

[ 8 : 40 ] That's the first thing, the public renewal of vows. Now the second thing, and really this is the long part of the chapter 4 to 25, by the public restoration of true worship.

Here is the proof that Josiah meant what he said. He didn't just say, we'll read the word and we'll be edified to bits and just let everybody get on with what they're doing.

This long passage where he systematically demolishes the apparatus of idolatry. Now, you may have found this rather wearying, listening to this or reading it.

And those of you who have been here in the earlier studies will remember that in the reign of his grandfather, Manasseh, and in the reign of his great-great-grandfather, Ahaz, the always kind of apparatus of idolatry is set up.

And you might wonder, why is it repeated so often? Why does it keep on harping on about it? Well, the reason is obvious. It keeps on harping about it because nothing had been done about it.

[ 9 : 50 ] Like an exasperated woman said once to the great evangelist George Whitefield, Mr. Whitefield, why do you keep on saying you must be born again? And Whitefield replied, because you must be born again.

And it's true today as when Whitefield said it in the 18th century, and of course when the Lord Jesus Christ himself said it to Nicodemus. And so here, you'll be glad to know I'm not going to go through this verse by verse.

What I'm going to try to do is to look at the pattern of how he publicly restores worship. Because this is what happens when God's people take God's word seriously and renew their love and affection for him.

This is the kind of thing that happens. So first of all, in verses 4 to 10, he puts an end to divided loyalties.

What I said already was that the trouble always begins in the heart. But when people's hearts turn away from the Lord, then his commandments become unattractive.

[10:59] The Bible becomes wearisome and irksome. And we look for other ways. Remember, there were two great phrases at the very heart of Israel's faith. One was the phrase in Deuteronomy, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one.

He's not divided up like the pagan gods into a multitude of gods responsible for different parts of the universe and different parts of your life. He is one. Therefore, he needs undivided allegiance.

And the other great phrase of the psalmist, My help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. And that's what Josiah is saying, essentially.

Pagan worship dilutes and pollutes this. Pagan worship is complicated. Pagan worship diversifies. Seems interesting.

But in the end, it leads nowhere. He gets rid of the Asherah. The Asherah, the symbol of the goddess of fertility, which actually stood in the very temple courts itself.

[12:05] Rather like bringing a mistress into the family home. That's the kind of thing that's being talked about. This happens in the New Testament as well. In Acts chapter 19, when Paul has his great preaching in Ephesus, the occult practitioners burn their magic books.

Clean break. A clean break with their pagan and idolatrous past. And wholehearted for the Lord and for his word. And it's very interesting in that chapter, Acts chapter 19, verse 20 of that chapter says, So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

And here in King Josiah's great reformation, there's an end to divided loyalties. This is not simplistic. It's not naive. It's because God is married to his people.

And like marriage, it requires loyalty. That's the whole theme of the great Old Testament prophets. Like particularly Jeremiah and Hosea. It's the same in the New Testament.

Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to himself a glorious bride. So that's the first thing. He puts an end to divided loyalties.

[13:19] Secondly, in verses 11 to 20, he puts right past wrongs. He gets rid of things that have been festering on for ages. Verse 10.

And verse 10, and to 12, the idolatry of his grandfather Manasseh and his great-grandfather Ahaz. This is a sober reminder.

The idolatry went much further back. It wasn't just a lapse. This had been going on for many, many generations. And the kind of things mentioned here, this ghastly and godless practice of burning children to Moloch.

In verse 10, and the prideful chariots of the sun. The reason why the Old Testament writers condemn horses and chariots is not because they don't like horses.

It's because horses and chariots are a symbol of military strength. That's why Isaiah says, trust in the Lord. Don't put your strength in. Don't trust in horses and chariots.

[14:26] But you see, the idolatry went much further back than that. Verse 13. The king defiled the high places over east of Jerusalem to the south of the Mount of Corruption, which Solomon, the king of Israel, had built.

We're taken right back nearly 400 years to Solomon's disastrous idolatry. Read that. One of the saddest chapters in the Bible is 1 Kings 11.

We read about Solomon's glory, his tremendous achievements in the early chapters, his open-heartedness to the Lord, the wisdom that God gives him.

And then, what do we read in 1 Kings chapter 11? When he became old, his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord, as the heart of David, his father, had been.

Where did Solomon fall down? He fell down in love and loyalty before he started building these chapels to his various brides and to the various...

[ 15 : 34 ] No doubt it was all spun by Solomon's spin doctors as being diplomatic. After all, these temples were embassies as well, and no doubt Solomon was hailed as the great international statesman.

1 Kings 11, of course, tells us what happened. Very far from being a great international statesman, his borders began to be threatened, and the land which had been peaceful for nearly 40 years began to dwindle away.

And then, verse 15, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. After Solomon's death, he was succeeded by his nimkenpoop of a son, Rehoboam, who succeeded within a few short months in having the kingdom torn in two.

And the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital later at Samaria, was taken over by this man, Jeroboam, one of Solomon's officials. And he is pilloried in Scripture as Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.

He set up a rival center at Bethel, Golden Calfs. He appointed priests, and priesthood for Jeroboam was simply a job.

[ 16 : 42 ] You applied for it if you wanted it. No kind of training, no kind of testing. Anyone wants to be a priest can be a priest. That was his attitude. And then, verse 16, if you read back in 1 Kings 13, an unnamed man of God had predicted that one day a man called Josiah would come and undo all that idolatry.

So you see, there's a picture here of putting right past wrongs. These wrongs go back in the nation's life. And indeed, if you read Deuteronomy, they are already beginning in the time of Moses and in the time of the conquest of the land.

These are two negative things he does. He puts an end to divided loyalties. He puts right past wrongs. And then in verses 21 to 25, he recalls the people to their roots.

It's never enough to be negative. You have to be negative. This is the demolition job. And as you know, demolition has to be done before rebuilding can happen.

There's no point in demolishing rubbish and then just leaving the space empty. It will soon become overgrown once again. So he has the great Passover. Now, verse 22 doesn't mean that no one had ever celebrated the Passover before.

[ 18 : 04 ] One of the great reforms of Hezekiah had been to celebrate the Passover. But this one was something special. You can imagine, it's difficult to read this without imagining what the emotion must have been.

As all the apparatuses of idolatry is taken and literally dumped by the cartload and burned. Then the people come together in this moving and solemn remembrance of the greatest event of their history.

The faithful God who had brought them out of Egypt. You see, once again, once again, it's not simply an appeal to rules and regulations. What's the Passover about?

The Passover says that you were slaves in Egypt and your God brought you out with a mighty hand. What is it? Paul says, Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us.

Therefore, let us keep the feast, which is what we shall do in some moments later on in the service. So he recalls people to their roots.

[ 19 : 12 ] And this apparently intrusive, verse 24, is not really intrusive. Moreover, Josiah put away the mediums, the necromancers, the household gods, and all the idols and all the abominations.

That's there for two reasons. First of all, it's a summing up of his demolition work. But it's also a reminder that the true way to God is not by the occult and by idolatry.

The true way to God is by the Passover lamb, the lamb that is sacrificed, whose blood opens the way into the holiest and opens the gate of heaven to all who believe.

So, in these verses, in these long and complex verses, it seems to me that what Josiah is doing, he says, first of all, we need publicly to renew our vows.

And we need publicly to restore true worship. And that means getting rid of false worship, essentially. And then, thirdly, there is a public vindication of God's word.

[ 20 : 16 ] That's the last part of the chapter, really, verses 26 to 30. If you had never read this chapter before, look at verse 25.

Let me read it again. Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind according to all the law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.

Surely the author will go on to say, and the Lord repented of his great anger against Jerusalem and turned away the judgment. But sadly, that's not what happens.

The public vindication, first of all, of the word of judgment. Now, Huldah the prophetess, back in chapter 22, had pronounced the word of judgment, the verse we looked at already.

The Lord will bring disaster upon this place and on its inhabitants. It wasn't just Huldah who said that. Long, long before Moses had said this in Deuteronomy 30, if your heart turns away to worship other gods, you will surely perish.

[ 21 : 31 ] church. And it is a word of judgment. And verses 26 and 27 are staggering after what we've read.

As I say, coming back to the point I made at the beginning, we don't know what stage we are in the history of God's people. We don't know, for example, what there is for our national church.

We are certainly ripe for judgment. And we don't know what God is going to do. So, we need to listen and we need to take heed this word of judgment.

And of course, the end of Josiah himself is terribly sad. After all this wonderful build-up, he perishes in an unnecessary military scurvish. Indeed, what's particularly ironic, he perishes in the same way as Ahab, king of Israel, had died, shot up by an arrow in a conflict that didn't need to happen.

Now, the political background to the story here is Assyria is lurching to its end. Babylon is rising to power, particularly under Nebuchadnezzar, whom, of course, we meet in chapter 25, meet again in the book of Daniel.

[ 22 : 44 ] Josiah's inglorious death. That doesn't mean that Hilda's prophetess about Josiah was wrong because she said, your eyes will not see the evil.

You'll be taken away. And Jeremiah has an interesting phrase, merciful men are taken away, none considering they are taken away from the evil that is to come.

And Josiah is a classic example of that. 23 years later, the curtain falls in this desperately, desperately sad verse. We'll turn over the page now to verse 2333.

So Judah was taken into exile, 25, 21, out of its land. This is one of those phrases, short, simple, no big words, but powerful and desolating, taken into exile, away from its land.

What C.S. Lewis calls the pilgrims' regress, they're back in the land that Abraham left. What an ending. But, there are two notes of hope.

[ 23 : 54 ] Zion is down, but Zion is not out. First of all, the final word on Josiah himself, and surely the final word on Josiah himself is verse 25 of chapter 23.

Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might. What is the Lord's summing up of this king who seemed to be such a failure at the end?

No, he is not a failure, says the divine word. His earthly work is undone, but his character and passion for God we cannot doubt last into eternity.

This was the man who built gold, silver and precious stones which will last into eternity. And look now at the very last verses of the book, verses we read earlier, 27 to 30 of chapter 25.

And you wonder, you may be wondering what all this is about. 26 years have passed since the exile and nearly 50 since Josiah's death.

[ 25 : 12 ] And then there's apparently a relevant little note. You know, why do you think this happened? Did the author come to the end of the page and find he still had a space and thought I'd better put in another paragraph?

No. What is he saying? He's saying the line of David is alive and well. In Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon the Davidic king notice gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon.

This is a line that's going to outlast Babylon. This is a kingship that's going to last forever. This is some nothing, not even the exile itself can break God's promise to David.

In 2 Samuel 7 repeated in Psalm 89 the Lord says if your sons turn away from me I will punish them but I will never take away my love from David and I will never break my promise to him.

It's a bleak time isn't it here? Exile in Babylon but surely it was in such a bleak time that the son of David himself was to come.

[ 26 : 24 ] They were still a conquered province under Rome they were still no nearer political self-realization than as Gabriel say he will reign over the house of David forever and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Josiah great and good man as he was couldn't even save himself but his son and the son of David did not save himself so that he might save others and one day his kingdom will reign over the whole earth.

Amen and hallelujah. Let's pray. therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us run with patience the race set before us.

Father we thank you for Josiah one of that great cloud of witnesses but above all we do not look back to Josiah we look to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God and we pray now as we meet around his table that we may realise that even in the time of his rejection even in the time when people ignore him and despise him that he still reigns and that one day he will win the nations and claim his earthly heritage we praise you for this in his name Amen