

Manasseh and Amon: Hope from the Horrid - Penitence that Prospers God's Plans

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 February 2023

Preacher: Josh Johnston

[0 : 00] Well, now we turn to our reading. Josh Johnston is going to be preaching to us this morning, and the passage that he's going to be taking comes from 2 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles chapter 33.

Now that's about halfway through the Old Testament. It's well before the Psalms, so about one third of the way through the Bible, 2 Chronicles chapter 33.

And this tells the story of a king of Judah, 7th century BC, I think more or less, but his name was Manasseh. He had a long reign, and it was not a happy time for the kingdom of Judah when Manasseh was king. So 2 Chronicles chapter 33.

Manasseh was 12 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for 55 years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down. And he erected altars to the Baals, and made Asherahs, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, in Jerusalem shall my name be forever. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he burned his sons as an offering in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling, and omens, and sorcery, and dealt with mediums, and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. And the carved image of the idol that he had made, he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to Solomon his son, in this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever. And I will no more remove the foot of Israel from the land that I appointed for your fathers, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses. 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. The Lord spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention.

[2 : 38] Therefore, the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks, and bound him with chains of bronze, and brought him to Babylon.

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. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty, and heard his plea, and brought him back again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

Afterwards, he built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon in the valley, and for the entrance into the fish gate, and carried it round Ophel, and raised it to a very great height. He also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah, and he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside the city. He also restored the altar of the Lord, and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and he commanded Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel. Nevertheless, the people still sacrificed at the high places, but only to the Lord their God. Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, and his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, behold, they are in the chronicles of the kings of Israel.

And his prayer, and how God was moved by his entreaty, and all his sin, and his faithlessness, and the sites on which he built high places, and set up the Asherim and the images, before he humbled himself, behold, they are written in the chronicles of the seers. So Manasseh slept with his fathers,

and they buried him in his house, and Ammon his son reigned in his place.

[4 : 48] Ammon was 22 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for two years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done.

Ammon sacrificed to all the images that Manasseh his father had made, and served them. And he did not humble himself before the Lord, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself.

But this Ammon incurred guilt more and more. And his servants conspired against him, and put him to death in his house. But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against King Ammon.

And the people of the land made Josiah his son, king in his place. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord bless it to us today.

Well, good morning. Do turn once again in your Bibles to 2 Chronicles chapter 33. Well, it's bonus time at work, and you're delighted with your treat.

[6 : 01] Grace is a wonderful thing, that something can be ours, despite us not deserving it, or despite us never being able to earn it.

But very often, when it comes down to it, we don't really like grace at all. We think of it a bit like that bonus. Because when we can get past the truth that it leaves us with nothing that we can boast about within ourselves, then often we find, as the next obstacle, what we find is that others receive grace, people who really don't deserve it.

We might think, well, I know that I don't really deserve God's goodness, but certainly I deserve it more than that person over there. Yes, I know that when I look at my life, it comes some way short of what it should be, but I'm not Hitler.

I'm not a murderer. I'm certainly not the person two seats to my right at church. Well, what we have before us today in Chronicles is the account of one of the worst kings, if not the worst king, not just in Israel or Judah's history, but ever.

And there was grace for him. Wonderful grace. But for God's people, it was exposing grace. And so the first thing that the chronicler tells us about Manasseh was that he was the worst of men, verses 1 to 9.

[7 : 47] He was the worst of men. Manasseh was wicked. By many measures, Manasseh was the worst king who has ever lived. Following on from his heroic father, Hezekiah, who was a great king who restored worship to the life of God's people.

Well, Manasseh was the opposite. He was everything in contrast. He was more evil than Hezekiah was good. If Hezekiah was a hero, Manasseh was a menace.

He jettisoned God, and he jettisoned God's word, and he led Judah completely astray. Look at the chronicler's summation of Manasseh's reign, verse 2.

He did what was evil in God's sight. And the evil he did was exactly as the Canaanites had done. That's what we see there in verse 2.

All the abominations that had been carried out before the land was given to God's people. All the horrors. All the sins of the Amorites. Manasseh was doing just the same.

[8 : 54] Remember, God had held off judgment on Canaan, and He'd held off on His people taking hold of the land because the sin of the Amorites was not yet complete.

And when it did come time for the judgment of God to fall upon Canaan, His people were to destroy everything. To leave nothing behind, as we see in the book of Joshua.

Nothing was to be left, for their evil was truly as awful as could be imagined. And what we see here from the chronicler is that Manasseh, the king of God's people, led Judah into doing the exact same things.

Look at verse 3. All the high places, all the altars of worship to other gods were put back up. Good King Hezekiah's reforms were undone.

You see that in politics often, don't we? Joe Biden setting about instantly undoing all that Donald Trump had done. Rishi Sunak doing likewise with all that Liz Truss had planned.

[10 : 01] Well, Manasseh put up altars to Baal and Asherah pools, and he worshipped all these false gods. And it was the worship of these gods that's always steered God's people away from him.

And so what were the particular abominations of Baal and Asherah? Here are two things that gave us a glimpse into the kinds of practices that worshipping these other gods involved.

The first thing in worshipping Baal and Asherah was the use of cultic prostitution, orgies. To get these gods to bring fertility to the land, it was believed that you could magically lead them to do what you needed by first doing it yourself.

So the practice was to have massive orgies, sex gatherings, temple prostitutes, to indulge in all of that in the hope that it would lead the gods to do likewise and super just rain and fertility on the land. Well, if that wasn't enough to expose the evil of this worship, another thing that they did was they practiced child sacrifice.

[11 : 08] Killing, burning babies in worship of Baal. Trying to gain favour with these so-called gods so they bless you. So here, take my child.

Of course, we might not think that these things exist anymore or that they are tempting in our age, but how many children are sacrificed every year on the altar of freedom in our country?

And it gets called progress or healthcare. Well, it is only as progressive as Manasseh at his worst. Manasseh also brought these altars that he was setting up into the temple, verses 4 and 5.

Bringing the barbaric religion into the very place preserved for the pure worship of God. The place where God would intimately draw together to meet with his people.

The place where God's name was to be forever. And Manasseh was tainting it, spoiling it with this false worship. A wife cheating on her husband in his own bed is like the betrayal of bringing idols into the temple.

[12 : 20] Not just committing the act, not just doing it, but rubbing it in, glutting in it, heightening the cruelty and unfaithfulness by doing it in the place that makes the relationship sacred. But there's more than that.

Verse 6. We read here of all the activities that Deuteronomy chapter 18 tells us are abominable to God. Manasseh is burning babies.

And he was occupying himself with the occult. Abominations to the Lord. And so we see that Manasseh did much evil, provoking God to anger.

Look at verse 7. God had promised that he would put his name in the house of David forever. And as long as his name was there, verse 8, Israel would never have their foot removed from the land. Notice how the chronicler uses God's name in this passage. Verse 4. Manasseh had built altars in the temple, of which God has said his name would be forever.

[13 : 22] And God promised that he would keep his name in the temple forever and the people in the land forever. But Manasseh has interfered with that, hasn't he?

And so look at the condition of God's promise. Verse 8. God had said he wouldn't remove the foot of Israel from the land if they'll be careful to do all that he commanded them.

The law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses. Well, Manasseh has failed in every possible way in this, hasn't he? His behavior is described as abominable.

Trampling God. Trampling his name. And trampling his temple. And verse 9. Whilst doing it all, he was doing it as the leader of God's people.

And so he was leading them astray, ripping the moral heart out of the people of God. Manasseh's reign was setting a course that would break God's covenant and so reap the curses that have been warned.

[14 : 27] Manasseh had done everything possible to see the foot of Israel removed from the land. And so look at the final summing up of all that Manasseh did. Verse 9. He did more evil than the nations God had destroyed.

More evil. Well, for Manasseh, what a terrible place to be in with a history behind that tells you how God deals with evil. Where you can see that those who had rejected God in all ways were destroyed.

And then to know that what you've done is worse. Well, what could possibly await? If we had to put a word to the reign of Manasseh, if we had to encapsulate all that he'd done to this point, then there's only one word that can do it.

He was the epitome of evil. And so there's only one thing that could await in the face of that. Exile. And so the chronicler shows us, secondly, the warning message in verses 10 to 13.

The warning message. A turning point comes in the story of Manasseh. And the turning point is exile. All kinds of evil had been happening.

[15 : 36] And God calls to his people and he speaks to them. But look at verse 10. When, despite the gracious word of God coming to warn, to try and turn things around, no attention is paid.

When God's word is shut out, when it's hushed, when it's ignored, when it's legislated against, there are consequences. When we belong to God and his people but veer away from serving him, when we silence his word out of our lives, out of our church, there are consequences.

Verse 11. Therefore the Lord brought upon them the army of Assyria. Now Assyria was the superpower of the day. And look at what happens to the king of God's people.

Verse 11. Bound with chains. And dragged off to Babylon with hooks. Humbled. Humiliated. Brought low. That is the destiny of any and all who scorn God. All who sideline his word. All who continue to solicit the sensual pleasures of this world.

[16:46] Dragged off and locked. Paraded in front of your enemies. That's the destiny. There's no mistake about that. For Manasseh, it was during his life on earth.

But for anyone, it will come. Eamon is the other example. Verse 22. What did he do? Only evil continually. Verse 23.

He wouldn't humble himself. And so verse 24. His servants conspired against him and killed him.

No humbling. No restoration. It might seem for a time like we can be prosperous on earth.

But if the humbling doesn't come now. If we don't listen to God's word now. Or if it comes now and we ignore it.

Then it will come finally. But as it was. Manasseh was humbled. And it brought him to his knees in prayer. Verse 12. In his distress.

[17:49] He pleads with the Lord. And humbles himself before God. Praying. Knowing what he had done. And coming to realize what he was before the only true God.

And so look at what happens. Don't miss this. The worst king in Israel's history. Think the level of Hitler. Of Pol Pot.

That level of atrocity. And add in the complete and outrageous contempt. That had been shown by God's king for God's temple. He broke all of the laws considered abominations.

He's the king who the writer of kings. Holds responsible for the exile. This king. When looking around and seeing that he was defeated.

That he was beaten. That he had no way out. That he was at the mercy and whims of a foreign power. What did he do? He humbled himself to speak to God. To cry out for help.

[18:46] To ask for God's grace. And even at the prayers of such a man. God has moved. Now we get that the prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective.

But really? The prayers of the most wretched man can move God? Really? Yes. Really. Truly humble repentance is always heard by God.

And look at what it leads to. Manasseh is brought back to his kingdom. He's given back his throne. Isn't grace outrageous?

His prayer leads to restoration. His prayer repentance brings a crown. Disaster can lead us to crying out and pleading to God.

But his response of grace leads us to know that he truly is God. And that's what Manasseh did.

Verse 13. Think of when you see someone who has just recently come to faith.

[19:53] And he knows what it is that they've been rescued from. And you cannot stop them from telling people about what God has done. When grace is received, it crystallizes for us that God is truly who he has revealed himself to be.

And so we can see in Manasseh that there is grace. There is restoration for anyone. No matter the mess that there is. No matter the misconduct. There is grace. Where there's a bowed knee.

And a lowly posture. And where there's an acknowledgement that a mess has been made. That things are not as they should be. When that's the case. There is grace.

Yes, the Bible warns us. Yes, it has a severe warning message. But the fact that we are warned.

The fact that we're told what awaits. The fact that we're told there are consequences for sidelining God.

It means that he is graciously giving us the opportunity to avoid final humiliation. He did so even for Manasseh. So he can do so for any and each of us.

[20:58] All we have to do is humble ourselves before him. Well, God puts Manasseh away from himself for a time. And it's a time that allows Manasseh to be brought back.

And it's a true thing that it is much better to be put out of God's people for a time. Than to be put out for eternity. Well, what happens next?

We also see in Manasseh what the response of repentance looks like. Verses 14 to 20. The work of making things right. Repentance is the work of making things right.

Verses 14 to 20. When mercy is received. When grace is at work. It transforms people to leave behind the mess.

And to put things right. Manasseh's crying out to God was not simply a stab in the dark. To try and get out of a tricky situation. We've seen flagrant attempts at getting out of a difficult situation.

[21 : 57] In our prisons in the news recently. That's not what we're seeing here. This isn't a hopeful deathbed conversion to cover the bases. Something to make the punishment a little bit easier.

No. Verse 14. Manasseh returns to Jerusalem. And immediately gets to work with rebuilding the kingdom that had been trampled.

Assyria had visited and raided. And so the fortifications needed to be restored. The fences needed to be put in place. And all that Manasseh had done that was evil.

Needed to be undone. And so he follows. Eventually in his father Hezekiah's footsteps. By ridding Judah of the sensual, seductive and insidious worship of Baal. Verse 15.

He literally takes all of the idols. And throws them out. Don't toy around with them. Don't toy around with what you've been rescued from. Threw them out.

[22 : 56] When I got married, there were a lot of things that I owned that needed to be thrown away. It might be obvious. But I am a much more refined man now than when I was first married.

The old Josh was still living like an unhealthy, scruffy student. And that needed to be gotten rid of. And as soon as we were married, the clear out began. It's still ongoing.

And similarly, as soon as Manasseh returned, and as soon as he encountered grace, the clear out began. The old Jerusalem of Manasseh's previous reign, that was gone.

There was now a new Jerusalem. Because the old Manasseh had gone and there was a new Manasseh. So verse 16. The temple was reopened.

It was restored. Sacrifices once again see thanksgiving and worship flowing through the people of God. Flowing through Jerusalem. Repentance was in full flow. And so the chronicler sums up Manasseh's life again in verses 18 to 20.

[24 : 02] There are lots of incidents about what he did that are recorded in history. But notice the detail that the chronicler emphasizes. Verse 18.

The rest of his acts and his prayer to God. Verse 19. And his prayer.

The end of verse 19. Manasseh humbled himself. The menace who was transformed. Now we could leave the story of Manasseh here and it would be an interesting and encouraging story of grace.

But we've skipped over some important details. Because the chronicler here has masterfully woven together this story. So that it gets behind his readers' defenses and shakes them.

And so finally we have the bewildering model. The bewildering model. Manasseh is set before the remnant.

[25 : 15] That's those who received this book. Manasseh is set before the remnant. The remnant. As the example for them. The worst king in Israel's history.

Is set up as a model to aim at. As they seek to restore the promised land. This will shock some people who know a bit about the Old Testament.

King's portrayal of Manasseh is even worse than what we have in verses 1 to 9 of this passage. King's has no hint of humbling. It only has more about his horrors.

King's solely lays the exile. The blame for the exile at the feet of Manasseh. And so some people here might be a little bit shocked to hear that Manasseh is set up as an example.

And to understand what was going on here. We need to know a little about the difference between kings and chronicles. They cover similar periods of history. Similar people.

[26 : 17] But they're written about 150 years apart. And they have very different purposes. So say for example there was a history of World War II that was written in the immediate aftermath of the war.

It might have been seeking to bring some understanding to people in the 1940s and 50s as to why it was so imperative that Hitler was stopped. Why the immense cost of the war.

The cost to the economy. The cost of lives. Was necessary. And so there's a very clear purpose in drawing together that history. It might draw particular attention to the rise of Hitler and all of his atrocities.

But say another history was written now. As Europe is again witnessing a war. Perhaps a history written in 2023 about World War II. Well it might focus on how to prevent another all-out war across the whole of Europe happening.

So it might focus particularly on diplomatic relations and their feelings in the build-up to World War II. Or in how effective appeasement was or wasn't. Well the difference between those two histories of World War II.

[27 : 28] Is similar to the difference between Kings and Chronicles. Kings was concerned with helping a people in exile understand why they were in exile. It was showing the pathway that led to God's judgment on them.

But now in Chronicles. 150 years later. The focus of the history is on how to prevent another exile. Chronicles was written to the remnant.

Those who'd returned to the land after exile. It was written to the same people who received Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai. And these kinds of books. And so the focus is on how to learn lessons. To direct the life of God's people who have returned from exile. To show them what to prioritize. To model for them what it is. To play their part in building the kingdom of God.

And so notice verse 11. Look at where Manasseh is dragged off to after the Assyrians took him.

[28 : 31] Not Assyria. But Babylon. But Babylon. An interesting detail that the chronicler puts in there. Of course it's legitimate.

Assyria would have had control of it by then. But the chronicler is wanting to show the remnant that Manasseh had the same journey that they had.

The same experiences then. He was dragged off to Babylon. Just as they were. He faced exile. Just as they did.

And like them. Manasseh returns to the land. But look at the things that Manasseh's return led to. Two specific details.

Two things focused on. Manasseh's example first. Walls. Verse 14. Manasseh's return led to him building a wall for the city.

[29 : 26] And adequate defenses. Why walls? Well think of the book of Nehemiah. Written to the same people. The remnants.

What was the concern of that book? That they set about rebuilding the walls. Re-fortifying the city. The restoration needed to have Jerusalem up and running again.

It needed to be able to withstand pressures from outside. So firstly walls. Second detail of Manasseh's example. Worship. Verses 15 and 16.

Manasseh rids Jerusalem of false worship. Making reforms to the skewed practices. That was the concern of Ezra. In his book.

To the remnant. To shepherd the restoration. Then verses 15 and 16. Manasseh restores the temple. And gets it functioning again.

[30 : 24] The concern of Haggai. For the people who'd returned. As the remnants to the land. To see the temple fully restored. And functioning for the remnant in the land.

The chronicler was writing to a people. Who had been given another chance in the land. They'd been in exile. But a faithful remnant had returned. And they had work to do. They needed to rebuild. And restore worship. The progress of God's kingdom depended on them. Obeying God's leading. Failure to do so would lead to another exile.

A permanent one. Failure to do so would be much more like Amon. Than Manasseh. But here's the shock factor. We can often find it hard to stomach.

Other people receiving grace. When we think that they don't deserve it. But with Manasseh's reputation. With Manasseh's reign of horror. With Manasseh's significant contribution.

[31 : 24] To the exile. The chronicler is now turning things around. On the restored community. And he's saying. Manasseh. Even Manasseh.

Put things right. When he returned from exile. Even Manasseh. Didn't waste the grace that he'd received. Even Manasseh.

Responded to God's work. Within him. If this menace. Upon receiving the grace of God. Could restore Judah's defensive strength. If this malfeasance.

Could restore true worship. And Judah. Then how could the returnees. Possibly stop short of that. What a pointed message. To the remnant.

And to us. Do you want to see. What repentance looks like. Then look. At Manasseh. It can be so easy.

[32 : 27] It can be so easy for our own sense of pride to stir within us. When we see people rejoicing over someone who's newly come to faith. And they're pressing on in service to the kingdom. Not perfectly.

But making progress. And showing real signs of promise. And people are giving them attention. And encouraging them. And celebrating them. and we look at it and think, do they know where that person was two years ago?

And not only can we easily balk at the fact that God might show grace to someone we deem undeserving, we then are bothered that they have a use in the kingdom of God.

There are a few things that really show where our hearts are at as pointedly as someone we don't like showing us up and outdoing us. Someone we think we're better than setting the example of the faithful Christian life.

That's what the chronicler was doing here with Manasseh. He was turning the mirror to point at his readers as they maybe flinched and twitched at Manasseh receiving grace, as they struggled to come to terms with the big bad villain of their history being portrayed as someone who repented and received mercy.

[33 : 39] And as they looked in the mirror that is God's word, they could see that if they didn't listen, if they didn't do what even Manasseh did, then maybe they would be to blame for the next exile.

Well, where does that leave us? God's grace produces change in people. It does not matter what our pasts look like.

Maybe you sit here and think, or know full well all that you've done. You know that God's grace is all that can help you. If you have received that grace, if you knew what it is for God to be moved by your crying out for help, if you've come to know that the Lord is God, then he's been at work within you to change you.

And that change is so that you can and will serve his grand purposes in the world. It's not too late. You're not too bad. Even Manasseh was useful for the kingdom of God.

Even the menace who was key in causing the exile was useful after repentance for God's grand purposes in the world. The apostle Paul, even after persecuting the church, was useful in the kingdom of God.

[35 : 09] That's what grace does. So anyone here who knows what they are without God, but knows what God offers and takes hold of it, anyone has a role to play in God's grand kingdom.

Now, of course, we don't have to build walls. We don't have to reconstruct a temple. We've lost our way if we think that repentance is all about buildings. But we do all have a part to play in building with living stones.

That is building with people. A church that truly knows God's grace is a church that wants others to encounter that same grace. It's a church that longs to see God's kingdom growing as more people are brought into it by believing the gospel.

Grace is a wonderful gift that is given to us. But it isn't a gift that we can put in our pockets. It isn't a gift that we can lock away in a safe place as something precious for later.

God's work within us as a church is to make us a fountain of grace for a needy world. Come and have a drink. So we don't need to go to Nigeria or Thailand or India to do that, to be a missionary.

[36 : 24] We're all to do that, wherever we are, with whatever we have. That's part of a church family. And we do that as we together do what we can to bring the gospel into the lives of those around us.

For some of us, we'll be good at having conversations in the staff room, at the barbers, on the train. For some of us, our hearts sink at the very prospect.

And so for many of us, it will simply be by building relationships of genuine care and interest with people and then inviting them to church on a Sunday where grace is taught and received through Jesus' presence with us and through Jesus speaking to us.

Friends, because of the grace of the Lord Jesus, all of us have something to offer. Grace transforms us and it brings us into a church and puts us to use for God's great purposes for this world.

If you can make a cup of tea or coffee, you can invest in God's kingdom by having an open home for the church family. If you have friends or neighbors or colleagues, you can bring them on a Sunday to hear the voice of God declare grace to his people.

[37 : 39] All of us have something to offer. It doesn't matter what our history is. God's grace changes us and fits us for his service. If even Manasseh can be made useful by God to serve his kingdom, then that goes to show that God's grace transforms any and all who receive it to have a purpose for his kingdom.

So Manasseh was a bewildering model, but he modeled grace at work in the people of God and he modeled what it was to respond to that grace.

Even Manasseh prioritized building God's kingdom. Let's pray. Lord, we pray that you would indeed expand our horizons to see more of your grand purposes for this world.

to always have in our minds the vision of your perfect kingdom, which one day we will see and enjoy fully and finally. And so, Lord, we pray that you would help us not to treat your grace cheaply, but to let it do its work within us, to transform us and our desires and our lives.

Help us, we pray. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[39 : 24] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.