

9. God's unexpected intervention

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[0 : 0 0] Now let's have a moment's prayer before we look at the passage together. God our Father, we ask 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. We ask this in the name of Christ Jesus, the living word himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. And if we could have our Bibles open please, 2 Kings 22, that would be a great help. That's page 329.

One of the great pleasures in life is anticipating happy events. At this time of year, many people are looking forward to holidays. Others are looking forward to weddings, to new experiences, to all kinds of excitements.

But I think there's an even greater pleasure, and that is the unexpected and unanticipated blessings that come into our lives. They can be very small things.

[1 : 1 4] It can be the unexpected phone call or letter, probably now email, which is encouraging. It can be a visit from a friend. It can be all kinds of things.

But the essence of them is that they're unexpected. And so it is in 2 Kings 22. There has been a terrible period of darkness in God's people's history.

Almost 60 years of idolatry, of unbelief, of apostasy, and of departure from the word of God. It's a long time.

When Josiah came to the throne, the period between him and his great-grandfather Hezekiah was nearly 60 years.

In other words, the amount of time that has elapsed since George VI, the father of our present queen, died in 1952 to the present day.

[2 : 1 1] For that whole period of time, there had been godlessness, unbelief, departure, and apostasy. Probably there would hardly be anybody still alive who remembered the great king Hezekiah and his reforms, Josiah's great-grandfather.

And we could be certain that Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather, and Ammon, Josiah's father, would have not only not encouraged people to remember Hezekiah, he would have actually encouraged his memory and his reforms to be suppressed.

In other words, the life of the nation is in ruins, the word of God is rejected. Now, why this sudden, unexpected, and surprising intervention of God?

Why is the light shining so brightly after decades of darkness? Now, when you come across a sudden work of God, which appears to have no kind of precedence at all, when you dig a little deeper, you'll always find that God, by His Spirit, has been at work all through these years of decline.

We know about Wesley and Whitefield and the great revival at the end in their time in the 18th century. We don't know the names of most of the praying people who, through the dismal years that led up to that, kept the light of the gospel alive.

[3 : 38] We get a similar situation way back in biblical history where the young boy Samuel is called after a similar period of darkness. And the writer tells us the lamp of God had not yet gone out.

A literal detail in the story, but nonetheless a spiritual detail as well. The lamp of God is still burning, although it's hidden. And when we look at the circumstances around Josiah's birth, we find a number of God's messengers had been very active.

A few years before, the prophet Nahum had prophesied the downfall of the great Assyrian Empire and shown that that was the action of God in history.

That's even more significant for Josiah. We'll look at this in a few weeks' time when we have our final study in Josiah. The prophet Zephaniah is working.

And Zephaniah may have been very close to the royal circle. He may have indeed been related to the king. And five years before the king came to the throne, the great prophet Jeremiah had begun his ministry.

[4 : 45] And there is Habakkuk as well, somewhere around this time. So even at times of desperate darkness, at times of unmitigated gloom, God is always working under the surface.

And that's what we're going to look at today in this chapter. The king comes to the throne at the age of eight, almost certainly. The Shephan mentioned in verse three would have been the power behind the throne in his earlier years.

But let's look at the story as it develops. The story of God's surprising intervention. And first of all, we have unexpected grace in verses one to ten.

What's the first thing that marks this story? Let's say this unanticipated blessing. The light shining in the darkness. Now, we would expect after 21, there would be an announcement of immediate judgment.

We'd expect someone else like Manasseh and Ammon, and we would expect the city and the country would soon fall. But yet, God gives us another unexpected glimpse of his kingdom.

[5 : 52] Here is someone on a par with his great-grandfather Hezekiah, indeed on a par with David himself. Verse two, he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the way of David, his father.

Here is a new David come to the throne. A reminder that God is keeping his promises. So, after chaos and muddle, because unbelief and idolatry always produce chaos, they always produce muddle, and always produce confusion.

Here is consistent discipleship. Chronicles tells us that Josiah, when he was 16, began to seek the God of David, his father.

This was no deathbed repentance. This was the consistent godliness that began in his youth. Always the best time to seek the Lord.

Always the time when our hearts are fresh, when our life is stretching before us. That is always a good time to seek the Lord, our God. There is an interesting phrase used about him that is not used about any of the other kings of Judah.

[7 : 04] The end of verse two, he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. And that is a phrase taken from Deuteronomy. The king in Deuteronomy is said to be one who follows the way of the Lord and does not return, does not turn to the right or to the left.

In other words, this is almost not just David come again, this is Moses come again. This is to be the defining feature of Josiah's reign.

He follows the Lord and does not deviate from that way. He restores the word of God to the people of God. And that all was how reformation and revival begin, by the restoring of the word of God to God's people.

There is always a danger of deviating from the gospel, turning to the right or to the left. The New Testament is very familiar with this.

You have the gospel plus, which is the way of legalism, adding other things to the gospel which are not part of the gospel, which are made as important as the gospel, and eventually become more important than the gospel.

[8 : 21] External things, external attributes, and the gospel of grace is lost under a welter of petty regulations.

On the other hand, it's possible to have the gospel minus, which is taking away from the gospel, and that's the way of liberalism, the way that reduces the gospel to moralism, to a fit-every-situation, a kind of plastic mold into which you can fit everything and follow every trendy opinion there is.

Josiah would have nothing to do with either of these things. He had nothing to do with petty regulations, nor did he turn away from the word of God to liberalism.

So that's the first thing to notice. About him, his consistent discipleship. And he begins that discipleship, it's shown, first of all, by repair work on the temple.

Now, if you're reading through the books of Kings for the first time, by the way, it's quite good sometimes to read through the Bible stories if you had never read them before, and to get the excitement and to see the patterns.

[9 : 37] When we read about this, perhaps our hearts begin to sink a little. Is this going to be another king like Joash? Some of you remember, some weeks ago we looked at King Joash, the boy wonder who came to nothing, the man who started repairs on the temple, but for him the temple was simply a building to be repaired, a job to be done.

But there was no mention in Joash's story of the word of God and of prayer. And you wonder, is this going to happen to Josiah as well?

But he's very clear as the story unfolds, that this repairing of the temple is simply the backdrop to the main story. And that main story is to be the finding of the book of the law.

Verse 8, Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And also the repetition of the word book.

Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, Shaphan read it to the king, Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book, and so on. When the king heard the words of the book of the law.

[10 : 46] This book of the law is almost certainly the book of Deuteronomy. Now the book of Deuteronomy had been the standard which kings were supposed to obey. Way back in 1 Kings chapter 2 verse 3, David on his deathbed says to Solomon, Walk after the ways of Moses.

Obey what he says and you will prosper. Hezekiah clearly knew this book of the law because this was the impetus for his great reforms, even though it's not actually mentioned.

And even in the days of the, what I've called the yes but kings, the kings who were moderately good but didn't wholly follow the Lord, like Amaziah back in chapter 14, the law of Moses is specifically mentioned.

This book is going to be literally dynamite. This book is going to turn everything upside down and change everything. There is the sense that something big is going to happen.

So it was at the Reformation when the, humanly speaking of course, the invention of the printing press meant that the newly released scriptures were made available to be read by people and earlier people like Wycliffe and Tyndale and others had translated the scriptures into the language of the people.

[12 : 08] That of course doesn't mean in itself that it's going to be read. After all, there's never been a day when there have been more variety of translations of the scripture, more attractively produced, and more helps to understand them.

And yet we still live in days of appalling biblical illiteracy. But yet, when the word of God is unleashed, things begin to happen. And this is a true Reformation.

So first of all then, we have God's unexpected grace. I have found the book of the law and the finding of the book of the law happens just at the time when there is someone there to react to that book of the law and to proclaim it throughout the land.

An unexpected grace is then followed by uninhibited repentance in verses 11 to 13. Notice the king's response. When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.

The king is following the pattern of Isaiah 62, 66 verse 2, where the prophet says, or the Lord speaking to the prophet says, this is the one to whom I will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

[13 : 30] Humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. So unlike the attitudes of today where people place themselves above this word.

People do not tremble at this word nowadays. In fact, what so often happens in theological colleges and universities and indeed in many churches is that people place themselves above this word.

Part of this word is used to discredit other parts, usually parts about love and compassion, which are interpreted in a sentimental way, and then used as reasons for not obeying the law of God.

Now you see what's really happening when people do that. They're actually not accepting any part of the word. They're not even accepting the parts about love and compassion because they are saying, we know which bits are right and which bits are wrong.

We know which parts suit us and which parts don't. Josiah, on the other hand, does not try to reinterpret. He doesn't say, look, things have been pretty awful.

[14 : 38] Let's not get too fanatical about it. After all, this will cause a disturbance. Everything will have to change if this word is obeyed. No, Josiah wants to obey.

And you notice, first of all, he doesn't stand on his dignity. He tears his clothes. Now that was a way of symbolizing repentance, not suggesting that people should tear their clothes when they hear the word of God.

Nevertheless, it is a sign in that culture that he had been deeply affected. And probably the part of Deuteronomy which had affected him most were chapters 28 and 29.

These are the chapters that talk about the blessings that will come from obedience and the cursings that will follow from disobedience. Now, blessing and cursing aren't just ways of saying, I like this and I don't like that.

When God blesses, God is pronouncing a destiny of salvation. God is saying, if this is obeyed, it will lead to life. It will lead to life in the world to come.

[15 : 47] It is also, of course, the right way to live in this world, even through difficulties and problems and dangers. But it will certainly lead to eternal life. Whereas cursing says, disobeying this word will lead to death.

It will lead to eternal death. It will lead to judgment. And as Josiah heard these words, even though he had begun to reform, he trembles.

He realizes these are the words of the living God. These are the words which my father and grandfather have systematically disobeyed. And he trembles as he thinks of his own family, as he thinks of the disobedience of his own court.

And he shows this by tearing his clothes. He trembles at his word. Now, nowadays, when there's a problem, we tend to set up committees and commissions to deal with it.

That's not what Josiah does. Josiah wants to inquire further. He says, verse 13, go inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah.

[16:58] Notice he's not just concerned about his own spiritual condition. He's concerned about his people. He's concerned about the nation. He had the law and now he wants, if you like, the prophetic commentary.

Remember, that's the important thing about the Old Testament. The revelation comes through Moses. And in the later Old Testament, the later writers, the prophets, the wisdom writers, build on that revelation, draw from it.

They use that as the word of God and apply it to their own day. And so, and so they send, and so they send to this prophetess, Huldah.

In verse 14, we'll come to that in a moment. Masses of energy has been expended by scholars and a great deal of ink and a great deal of ink spilled on why they sent to the prophetess, Huldah, rather than, say, to Zephaniah or Jeremiah or Habakkuk or someone else.

I'm going to disappoint you. I don't know the answer to that. And I don't need to know the answer to that. Because, remember, the point is being made, as it's made so often, that God chooses who he will speak through.

[18:17] In our evangelical celebrity culture, we so often forget that it is the message and not the messenger. The preaching and not the preacher which matters.

In fact, we've never heard of Huldah before and we never hear of her again is irrelevant. This is the instrument that the Lord God chooses and through her he gives that message which confirms the message of Moses, which shows, of course, she is a true speaker for the Lord because her words take the words of Moses and apply them to the situation.

So, unexpected grace as Josiah comes to the throne. Uninhibited repentance as Josiah hears the word. And then in verses 14 to 20 we have uncompromising clarity as the message confirms the prophetic word.

And notice, first of all, this is a word of judgment. Verse 13, Huldah said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants.

All the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. Now, notice, Huldah does not stand on ceremony. Tell the man who sent you to me.

[19:45] That's because under the word of God, kings and the great and the good are simply subjects as well as others. Rather like the words of Andrew Melville, the second generation reformer to King James VI and I, that there are two kings and two kingdoms in this realm.

There is the human realm of which you, James, are Lord and Master. And there is the kingdom of Christ Jesus in which you, O King, are but a silly vessel.

Silly doesn't quite mean what it means to us. But nevertheless, he was putting James in his place and saying, Look, under the word of God, King James, you are the same as others.

That word judges. That word penetrates whether you're a king or a commoner. And notice the reasons. And notice judgment is not simply an ounce.

Judgment, the reasons are spelled out. Verse 17, Because they have forsaken me and made offerings to other gods. Now, in chapter 23, we're going to see how Josiah systematically dismantles the apparatus of idolatry.

[21 : 00] But here we're going right to the heart of one of the main themes of the books of Kings. That these people, these kings, have broken the covenant.

It's a failure in loving God before there is a failure in obeying God. They have broken the covenant. The whole theme of which God do we trust?

Whose word do we believe? Therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place and it will not be quenched. Even Josiah isn't going to be able to turn back judgment.

And we'll see more of that. Even a revival is no guarantee that any church will be saved. Of course, the church of Jesus Christ, the gates of hell, will not prevail against it.

It cannot be overthrown. And yet, any single church, any denomination, can be, if it rejects, the word of God.

[22 : 01] There is a word of judgment. But you notice there is a word of mercy. Verse 16, But to the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of the Lord. Notice, it's important to realize Huldah wasn't just being rude when she said, the man who sent you.

Because here, she calls him the king of Judah. Recognizing, this is a true king come at last. How has he shown he's a true king?

He's shown he's a true king by sending to inquire of the Lord. The letter of Hebrews says, Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you.

That is the biblical definition of a leader. Those who spoke the word of the Lord to you. Those who didn't come in their own authority, that came in the authority of thus says the Lord.

So Huldah recognizes him as a true leader who trembles before the word of God and obeys it. Verse 19, Because your heart was penitent and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard how I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants.

[23 : 09] I also have heard you, declares the Lord, the loving mercy of our God. even in the blackest times, even in the most difficult of situations, it is still possible to obey the word of the Lord and to be blessed by obeying it.

I think that's such an important point here. Now, as we'll see later on, Josiah himself does die after a foolish military adventure. Josiah is not yet the Messiah or the serpent crusher.

And yet, these words are absolutely true. Josiah does not see the devastation. Josiah does not see the tearing down of the walls, the burning of the temple and the carrying of people into exile.

Josiah's own faith, Josiah's own godliness means that in his day that judgment is delayed. God is slow to anger.

God is merciful. Now, what about today? We don't know what the future holds for the church in this country or indeed in any other country.

[24 : 22] We don't know what the future holds for our own Church of Scotland. We don't know if the decline will continue. We don't know if the disobedience and the apostasy will be institutionalized and the church and the candlestick will be removed.

We don't know that. What we do know is that Josiah's god is our god and who knows even in those days there may be unexpected interventions of grace.

That's why it's so important in those days we don't simply shrug our shoulders and say, oh, things are awful. We've just got to make the best. We've just got to make the best of it. The decline will continue.

What we need to do in the days we are living in is to pray that God will raise up Josiahs. That even in those times of decline and disobedience and apostasy that God will raise up people who will turn the nation and the church back to God.

And God can do that. We don't know if God will do that but we know that even in times of decline and that's the point surely of all those words of mercy the word they brought back to the king the last words of the chapter even in those days God will bless those who are faithful to him.

[25 : 47] God will honour faithfulness to his word even if the judgment is still going to come. So let's pray. Let's continue what we are doing with greater vigor preaching proclaiming the word of God and praying to the Lord that the rivers of his grace may yet flow again.

Amen. Let's pray. And God our Father as we think of this godly young king Josiah and think of the potential there are in young lives particularly who wholly follow the Lord and give themselves to obey the words of this book we pray in the words of the hymn revive your work oh Lord your mighty arm make bare speak with a voice that wakes the dead and make your people hear.

This is our prayer Lord Christ and we pray that he will grant it in your name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.