

Josiah and the Power of Obedience

FOCUS THOUGHT

God expects us to obey His Word.

»» FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 22:13

Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.

»» LESSON TEXT

II Kings 22:8–13, 18–20

8 And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.

9 And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the LORD.

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.

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18 But to the king of Judah which sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard;

19 Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the LORD, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the LORD.

20 Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

ADVICE FROM AN ELDER

Wayne and Gayle Ellard had been pastoring in Greenville, Mississippi, for around twenty years when the district superintendent, G. R. Travis, came to discuss retirement. He was traveling and encouraging the Mississippi ministers and their churches to invest in a retirement plan with the UPCI. Pastor Ellard had believed in pouring as much as possible back into the church and did not in any way want to be a burden or take advantage of the people he served. Due to the insistence of a trusted church official and the desire of the church to start retirement for their pastor, Wayne Ellard agreed to obey the advice of his elder.

Around age fifty-five it became apparent that Pastor Ellard was suffering from an illness the doctors in Mississippi could not diagnose. After suffering for close to ten years, and at the recommendation of his doctors, the Ellards moved to Colorado to be with two of their daughters and receive better medical attention.

He was diagnosed with Primary Progressive Aphasia, and God opened the door for him to be able to live in a new, beautiful care center with medical personnel who understood this illness. The time he was there was completely paid for by his retirement fund. He and his family were treated with respect and honor as he finished his life on this earth. The month the retirement fund ran out was the month God took Pastor Ellard home. God knew what would be needed years in advance and worked through His people's obedience to bring it to pass.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. AN ERA OF REVIVAL

- A. The Disastrous Reign of Manasseh
- B. The Dawning of Hope
- C. God Can Intervene in My Worst Circumstances

II. A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

- A. The Death of Josiah
- B. The Dissipation of the Revival
- C. Sometimes Good People Face Tragedy

III. THE MANY FACES OF FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE

- A. To Obey Is Better Than to Succeed
- B. The Aftereffects of Josiah's Revival
- C. We Must Remain Faithful in the Face of Failure

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, and Henry Ford. These names are all quickly recognized as three of the world's greatest twentieth-century inventors. However, not many would recognize the names Spencer Silver and Art Fry. Yet it is no stretch to say their invention is even more ubiquitous than the iPhone.

Spencer Silver was an engineer working at 3M in 1968, trying to create super-strong adhesives for the aerospace industry. He discovered a type of adhesive called acrylate copolymer microspheres (ACMs). Unfortunately, instead of being incredibly strong, ACMs were incredibly weak. However, they did have two unique features. First, when removed from a surface, they left no residue. Second, even after being adhered to a surface, they retained their stickiness and were effectively reusable multiple times.

Five years later, in 1973, Silver approached Geoff Nicholson, 3M's products laboratory manager, with an idea for a product—an ACM-

coated bulletin board. Papers could be stuck to it without using thumbtacks or staples and could be removed without getting any “sticky stuff” on the displayed items.

Enter Art Fry, a 3M product development engineer. He was already familiar with Silver’s ACM adhesives and his proposed bulletin board. However, Fry sang in a church choir and constantly dealt with the problem of his paper song-page markers falling out of the hymnal. Then he had an idea: Why not use some of Silver’s ACM adhesive on the page markers to keep them in place? Fry then suggested to Silver and Nicholson that they put the adhesive “on a piece of paper and then we can stick it to anything.” And, just like that, the Post-It Note was born.

From one perspective, Spencer Silver’s work could be considered a total failure; from another point of view, though, it could be considered a stunning success. In today’s lesson, we will explore the life of a Judean king whose own story can be read in two very different ways. And it reminds us, just like the lowly Post-It Note, that not every so-called “failure” is quite as disastrous as it first may seem.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. AN ERA OF REVIVAL

A. The Disastrous Reign of Manasseh

His fifty-five-year reign in Jerusalem was the longest of all the kings of Israel or Judah (II Kings 21:1). Usually, in Scripture, long reigns (like long lives) are symbolic of divine blessing on righteous living. However, in the case of Manasseh, quite the opposite is true. He not only was Judah’s longest-reigning king but also its most wicked ruler. The author of Kings catalogued many of Manasseh’s offenses, comparing them to the prior occupants of the land (II Kings 21:2, 9).

In other words, under the reign of Manasseh, Judah became more wicked than the Canaanites whom the Lord had destroyed when Israel conquered the Promised Land! This is a key part of the reason that during the reign of Manasseh God first proclaimed His intention to destroy the city of Jerusalem and send the people into exile (II Kings 21:11–15). Manasseh set in motion the disaster that brought the destruction of Judah’s capital and Yahweh’s holy Temple.

» *Why do you think God’s judgment so often takes years to come fully to pass?*

B. The Dawning of Hope

Against that extremely foreboding background, the reign of Manasseh’s grandson Josiah burst onto the scene with the light of hope. Josiah was the last and greatest of the reformist kings of Judah, in the tradition of Asa (I Kings 15:11–15) and Hezekiah (II Kings 18:1–8), both of whom walked in faithfulness to God. In fact, in offering an evaluation of the quality of Josiah’s reign, the author of Kings reported: “And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (II Kings 22:2). Josiah’s

faithfulness was unmatched, even by the “man after God’s own heart,” David! As great a king as David was, even his life was marred by his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her lawful husband, Uriah. (See II Samuel 11.) There was no such blot on Josiah’s recorded reign.

Josiah’s religious reforms were more extensive than any other. First, the catalog of King Josiah’s reforms exceeded the description of Manasseh’s sins (II Kings 23:2–25). Second, Josiah’s reforms included the destruction of the high places, especially the false altar of the Northern Kingdom erected at Bethel, an altar that had stood since the time of Jeroboam I and had become the iconic symbol of Israel’s apostasy. (See I Kings 12:28–33; II Kings 17:9–12.)

This second action was vitally important because King Josiah was used by God to fulfill a prophecy given by an unnamed prophet from Judah at the time of the altar’s construction (I Kings 13:2).

Josiah fulfilled this centuries-old word of judgment to the letter, even disinterring bones from nearby sepulchers to burn upon the altar (II Kings 23:16). In so doing, Josiah’s reform reversed the apostasy of both Jeroboam and Solomon.

Josiah’s final reforming action was to observe a national Passover at Jerusalem (II Kings 23:21). The only other recorded Passover celebration of this scope is found in Joshua 5:10–12, just before the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

C. God Can Intervene in My Worst Circumstances

It is important to pause here and contemplate the spiritual distance between the reigns of Manasseh and Josiah. No one who lived during Manasseh’s reign, with its rampant idolatry and immorality, could ever have imagined a revival quite like Josiah’s. It would have seemed to the average onlooker as if all hope for national restoration and a return to God was dead. Yet Josiah’s revival was greater than any the nation had previously seen. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God commanded His people:

Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18–19)

One of the most fascinating and pivotal figures of modern history is British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When he came to power in May 1940, the nation teetered on the brink of total collapse. Churchill, however, with that bulldog glower and growling voice, was able to inspire the nation to continue resisting. In his book about Churchill, *Darkest Hour: How Churchill Brought England Back from the Brink*, author Andrew McCarten points out a key reason why Churchill’s words were so inspiring: “In stark contrast to Hitler’s egomaniacal speeches—which emphasized the word ‘I’—Churchill . . . knew the power of ‘We’ when exhorting the British public to take up such a fearful struggle.” Churchill’s words, like the words of the rediscovered Book

of the Law in Josiah's day, were able to inspire hope and courage. And yet today, the Word of God should continue to inspire us to never give up hope, even when all appears to be hopeless.

» *What passage of Scripture do you often turn to when you need inspiration?*

II. A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

A. The Death of Josiah

It is fun to speculate about the national feeling in the weeks following Josiah's celebration of the first national Passover since Joshua's day. The atmosphere could only be described as euphoric. True change had come at last; the sins of past generations had finally been dealt with. In the midst of this revival, the conclusion of the story of Josiah's reign comes like a thunderclap. In one brief verse, the author of Kings tells us Josiah went to war and was killed (II Kings 23:29). Scholars today are still puzzled by Josiah's actions in this matter. It does not appear Pharaoh Necho was threatening Judah, so why did Josiah go out to meet him in battle? Josiah's actions are not presented as foolishly provocative nor as rebellious against God's Word. It appears Josiah was simply doing what he felt was right to protect his kingdom, and he died for his efforts.

B. The Dissipation of the Revival

Unfortunately, Josiah's untimely and unexplained death quickly killed the revival's momentum. Jehoahaz, his son, was quickly deposed as the Judean king, and his brother Jehoiakim was set up as a pro-Egyptian "puppet-king" of Judah. As the memoirs of the prophet Jeremiah testify, Jehoiakim was nothing like his righteous father. He plundered the newly restored Temple to pay tribute to Egypt and imposed a heavy and oppressive tax on the people of God (II Kings 23:35). The concluding evaluation of Jehoiakim's reign by the author of Kings is made more tragic in its brevity: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done" (II Kings 23:37). All the good Josiah had accomplished was undone by Jehoiakim.

C. Sometimes Good People Face Tragedy

The difficult reality is that bad things do happen to good people for no apparent reason. Even though we know such suffering is ultimately the result of sin's corruption of God's perfect world, such an understanding does not assuage our grief when we see those we love caught in the throes of pain and heartache. These are the moments that can push our faith to its breaking point. If we are honest, we all, at one point or another, have wrestled with what C. S. Lewis called "the problem of pain."

Yet if we are to persist in our honesty, we would also be forced to admit the truth of Lewis's further observation about the reality of pain: "I have seen great beauty of spirit in some who were great sufferers. I have seen men . . . grow better not worse with advancing years, and I have seen the last illness produce treasures of fortitude

and meekness from most unpromising subjects” (*The Problem of Pain*). The deepest mystery of pain’s reality lies not in the suffering, but in the wondrous beauty only pain’s endurance can produce.

- » *Consider for a moment one of the most difficult or painful times in your life. Would you say it made you a better person? If so, in what ways has suffering and pain actually benefited you? How can you use the lessons you have learned to help others cope with their pain?*
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III. THE MANY FACES OF FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE

A. To Obey Is Better Than to Succeed

Josiah’s death, even today, calls into question the value of his reform. Certainly, he was the greatest reformer the nation had ever known, restoring the rule of God among the people of God to an extent unmatched by any before or after him. So what? When he died, his sons went right back to following the evil ways of their great-grandfather Manasseh. In fact, Josiah’s reforms lasted so short a time, it is difficult to even describe them as a “success.” Honestly, Josiah’s reign would appear to be better categorized as a failure.

This becomes even more certain when we consider the prophecy of Huldah to Josiah, given before Josiah ever launched his reform program:

Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. (II Kings 22:16–17)

Josiah’s reforms were not enough to reverse God’s decision to destroy Jerusalem and send Judah into exile! Then why would Josiah exert so much energy on a reform that was useless? Quite simply, because doing the right thing is more important than being successful. Once Josiah learned from God’s Word what obedience to the covenant required, the outcome no longer mattered.

- » *Why is it so easy for us to fall into the trap of serving God in order to get something from Him?*
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B. The Aftereffects of Josiah’s Revival

Before we assign Josiah’s reform to the category of “Abject Failure,” we should consider briefly a story from the Book of Jeremiah, taken from the time after the city had fallen to the Babylonians. As would be expected, it was a time of tremendous upheaval. Within just a few weeks or months of his appointment, the Babylonian governor Gedaliah was assassinated by Ishmael ben Nethaniah (Jeremiah 41:1–3).

The day after, a group of eighty pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem to mourn the loss of the Temple. Ishmael, fearing discovery of his crime, murdered all of them in cold blood and buried them in a mass grave (Jeremiah 41:4–7). However, what gets lost in the horror of all this senseless bloodshed is the brief aside that these pilgrims came “from Shechem, from Shiloh, and from Samaria” (verse 5), cities located in the region of the long-overthrown Northern Kingdom.

Ever since the days of Jeroboam, Israel had been rife with idolatry and false worship. There were no righteous northern kings; every one of them was wicked and evil. Yet Josiah’s brief foray decades before into the territory of the Northern Kingdom to destroy the shrine at Bethel seems to have brought something of a revival to the remnant of the people left there. Though Josiah’s reforms did not last in Jerusalem, they had a lasting effect in these northern cities!

C. We Must Remain Faithful in the Face of Failure

Was Josiah’s reform a failure? The answer, it seems, is not clear-cut. Certainly, Josiah’s reforms did not rescue the city of Jerusalem from destruction, but they did revive the worship of God in northern territories long overrun by idolatrous worship. Josiah’s reforms may not have had the lasting effect he hoped for, but they did have a lasting effect!

This points us again to the importance of faithfulness, even in the face of apparent failure. Just because we do not achieve our purposes or goals does not mean our obedience and faithfulness do not achieve any purpose or goal. In fact, obedience to God is never about achieving our purposes, but should always be focused on achieving His purpose.

» *Have you ever faced a situation where you had to obey God without understanding why? Was it difficult? Why? What thoughts and feelings did you battle? In the end, what was the result of your obedience?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

It is important that we understand Josiah did not simply obey God because He hoped to get God to bring him success and prosperity. Josiah obeyed God because God is to be obeyed. Too often, we treat obedience and faithfulness as a means to an end—success, happiness, fulfillment, contentment—when, in reality, obedience and faithfulness must be seen as ends in and of themselves. Otherwise, obedience simply becomes another tool in the sinful human quest to control God and make Him do what we want. The fundamental principle of Scripture is that God is God . . . and we are not: “We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100:3, NKJV).