

2 Chronicles 34

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[0 : 0 0] What will be written on your gravestone? I thought I'd just kick off with a cheery question, but let me lighten the mood somewhat.

Some of you will have heard, although as I look in front of me and see quite a lot of young faces, this may not be true of many of you, but some of you will have heard of the late Spike Milligan. Spike Milligan was one of the co-creators of The Goon Show, a famous radio comedy show in the 1950s.

Now that is a long time ago. Even I wasn't born then, so that really is a long time ago. And he's been described as the godfather of alternative comedy. You can judge for yourself how significant a distinction that is.

But back to the gravestones. On Spike Milligan's gravestone, there is the epitaph in Irish Gaelic that reads, I told you I was ill. Now that maybe gives you some idea of his rather alternative sense of humor.

Well, we've read about Josiah, a king of Judah, a long, long time ago. And in our reading, there is a statement about Josiah that could well have served as a fitting epitaph on his gravestone.

[1 : 1 6] Now, we don't know if he had a gravestone or if it was engraved. But had he had one, then this would have been a very fitting summary of his life. And it's the words that we find in verse 2 of the chapter that we read in 2 Chronicles chapter 34.

And we read of Josiah, Very fitting if that indeed had marked the place of his grave, King Josiah.

Josiah was a young man who had focus, discipline, and direction. He was a powerful man, and yet he was a humble man.

He was a man of God and a man used by God. Josiah was a man who made a difference in his day and generation. And I want us to learn a little more about Josiah.

What made him the man that he was. But I don't want you to just be impressed by Josiah. I want you to be like Josiah. When we have perhaps character studies in the Bible, or we perhaps have a sermon where we're focusing on a man or woman of God, there's a danger that we can look on and say, Well, how wonderful.

[2 : 3 8] You know, praise God for the life of this man or woman. And we simply are spectators admiring the life of another. But the purpose of the record that we have in God's work is not that we simply admire those who have gone before us, but that by the grace of God, we be like them in their faithfulness and obedience.

And so that is what I would want for you as we consider the life of this man. Just to locate ourselves historically, Josiah was the king of Judah, the southern kingdom, from 648 to 609 B.C.

Now, that is a long time ago. But let me give you a historical reference point, just so that you can kind of locate yourself in history. Now, you remember Daniel and the Lion's Den, maybe one of the more well-known of the Bible stories.

Now, Daniel was an exile in Babylon, and that happened when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, besieged and conquered Jerusalem and carried off to Babylon Daniel and his friends as exiles.

Now, the king of Judah, when that happened, was King Jehoiakim, and King Jehoiakim was the son of Josiah. And I give you that little bit of a reference point simply because of the familiarity that maybe many of you will have with Daniel, and you kind of can locate where Josiah fits in the timeline of Bible history.

[4 : 20] Josiah was a star, we could say. Maybe that's not the most appropriate word. But he was a man, a king who dragged Judah, possibly kicking and screaming from the pit of idolatry and moral decay to the heights of a renewed national covenant with God and loyalty and faithfulness to God.

And he is justifiably spoken of in very glowing terms in the Bible. We've read that in this chapter in 2 Chronicles. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or the left.

And indeed, in other parts of the Bible where we read of Josiah in Kings, he's also spoken of in similar terms. So, let's take a short tour of his life and learn some lessons on the way.

And I'll structure what I want to say under the following four headings that highlight successive chapters or moments in Josiah's life. First of all, I want to think of Josiah under the heading, Breaking the Cycle.

And hopefully when I explain what I mean by that, it will become clear why I use that language. So, first of all, breaking the cycle, but then secondly, a wise decision. Focus in on a moment, an occasion, a time in Josiah's life where he made a wise decision.

[5 : 46] And then all that followed from that. But then also to think of Josiah as we read of him and what we discover about him, under the heading, Working with God. Josiah working with God.

And then finally, a fitting epitaph. And that will bring us back to where we began in verse 2 and what it says about him. So, that gives you an idea of where we're going or the direction in which we're going.

First of all then, breaking the cycle. Now again, and I've kind of hinted at this already, it's all very well preaching sermons on the heroes of the faith.

Perhaps a Moses or a Joseph or a Daniel or a Ruth or an Esther or a Josiah. But is it realistic to imagine that regular people, you and me gathered here this morning, is it realistic to imagine that we could ever be like these men and women?

Can you really be like Josiah? In the real world that we live in, of dysfunctional families, of inexistent or negative role models, of stressed out young people, full of issues and laden with debt, you're not going to find a Joseph or a Daniel or a Josiah.

[7 : 03] In the real world, people are trapped in vicious circles, in cycles of destructive behavior that maybe have been inherited from previous generations. So that even if you have a man or a woman, a young man, a young woman, who rather naively and movingly want to break that cycle and become a Daniel, become a Joseph, become a Josiah, become a man of God, become a woman of God, we kind of conclude sometimes, well, it's not going to happen.

It's a noble aspiration, but life isn't going to allow that to happen. But when we look at Josiah, we find that Josiah lived in the real world.

Josiah was part of a dysfunctional family with teenage parents and a nightmare of a father. His father was a disaster. Let's just notice what is said about him in the previous chapter, in chapter 33 of 2 Chronicles.

We read from verse 22, He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. And this is the father of Josiah that he's being spoken of, Amon, the king of Judah.

He did evil in the eyes of the Lord as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshipped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord.

[8 : 23] Amon increased his guilt. What a terrible epitaph for Amon. Imagine if on his gravestone that had been engraved. Amon increased his guilt. What a tragic summary to a man's life.

Well, this is the father of Josiah. His grandfather wasn't much better, though it does speak of a moment of repentance in the part of his grandfather.

This was the home that he was part of. This was the line from which he descended. You could say that he was destined for disaster. It was in his genes.

It was engraved in his DNA. One more mediocre, self-seeking, God-dishonoring king of Judah. What more could you expect of this young man?

But Josiah broke the cycle. Hence the language. He broke the cycle. Like father, not like son. Josiah decided he would break the cycle.

[9 : 21] Josiah resolved to be different. When Josiah was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would answer, and of course we're just speculating here, a king, but not like my daddy.

And he didn't have to wait until he grew up. We've touched on that as we spoke to the children a few moments ago. When an eight-year-old should be playing football in the park, Josiah became king of Judah.

You can be a Joseph, a Daniel, a Josiah. You can break out of vicious circles, smash through destructive cycles.

Mediocrity is not in your genes. Failure is not your destiny. Your parents messed up their marriage. Well, you can build a beautiful one. Your home was marked with aggression, repressed hostility, and coldness.

The home you build can be a haven of love and tenderness and understanding. Perhaps in your family, serving God was a pastime. For you, it can be a passion.

[10 : 24] You've only ever known a church in decline. Well, you can be part of a church that grows and flourishes. Josiah broke a cycle. You can break your cycle.

Like father, not like son. So that's the first thing I want to just stress about Josiah, how he breaks this destructive cycle that he was a part of.

But the next moment that I want to highlight is this wise decision that he took and that we are told about in our passage. And really here what we're doing is answering the crucial question, how did he break the cycle?

It's all very well. You know, maybe using very stirring language and saying, you can do this. You can break the cycle. You can be different. But how? That's the more important question, isn't it?

How can I do that? Well, how did Josiah break the cycle? The heart of the matter is found in the decision that Josiah took aged 16. Notice again, as we just return to the passage at the beginning of chapter 34, we're told Josiah was eight years old when he became king.

[11 : 26] So this is really very simple arithmetic. He was eight years old when he became king. And then in verse 3, we read, in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David.

So he was eight when he became king. In the eighth year of his reign, he began to seek the God of his father David. So he was 16. That's when he took this wise decision.

At age 16, he was about to take the reins, not only of his life, but of the kingdom. The time had come to stop simply relying on his advisors who had really effectively been governing while he was still a child.

It was time for him, as a young man, to stop depending on others, to make the tough calls. The time had come to stop perhaps mindlessly following and to start taking the lead.

Maybe that's the stage of life that you're at. Perhaps for some of you, this is a stage of life where you've left home. You're no longer simply doing what mom and dad tell you to do, or not doing what mom and dad tell you to do, whatever the case may be.

[12 : 34] It's time for you to make your own decisions and to work out your own path in life. And it's a good time to make wise decisions about how you will do that.

What lead would Josiah take now that he was no longer following the lead of others? What kind of king would he be? What kind of person? What kind of human being?

What kind of father? What kind of husband would he be? He would be a king, but not like his daddy. He would be a husband, but not like his daddy. He would be a father, but not like his daddy.

Now, Josiah needed help to be different. He needed help to break the cycle. So often today, we almost hear, or we often hear this language of, you can be everything you need to be.

You can be what you dream to be. But it's all grounded on some idea that we can do that by ourselves. It's in you. It's inside you. Now, that's not what we have here.

[13 : 36] Yes, Josiah wanted to be different, but he knew that he needed help. He knew that it wasn't in his own power. It wasn't some force within him that would enable him. He knew that he needed help if he was going to be different.

Help he was unlikely to get from those around him. So he makes a wise decision to seek the God of his father, David. If he was to be a king like David, he needed to know David's God.

And so he sought David's God, and he found David's God. And he kept seeking, and he kept finding throughout his life. Josiah came to know God personally.

And all his subsequent life and actions give ample testimony to this. This was a wise decision that changed his life. While he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father, David.

And may that be true of you. If you are young here this morning, not all of us here are young, but those of you who are young, may this be especially true of you. While you are still young, seek the God of David.

[14 : 47] Seek the God who reveals himself in the Bible, the father of Jesus Christ. While you are still young. Have you made this wise decision?

Have you sought God? Are you seeking God? Have you come to know God personally? Is he your God? There is only one way to know God.

In the light of the fuller revelation of the New Testament, we know that there is only one door you can go through to find him and to know him. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No man comes to the Father but by me. If you are to know God, you have to know him through Jesus. As you come to Jesus and as you trust in Jesus and as you follow Jesus, there is one well-trodden road that you must travel.

The road of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the truth. Recognize your need as both a victim of sin but also as the willing author of sin.

[15 : 56] And come to Jesus asking him to forgive you, to become your Savior and your Lord. Perhaps some of you say to me, and I praise God if this is so, I've done that already.

I'm trusting in Jesus. I've already come to him. Well, keep on coming. Keep on seeking. Keep on repenting. And keep on trusting. Josiah broke a cycle.

Josiah made a wise, he took a wise decision to seek God. But the third thing that I want us to think about this morning, as we kind of go through his life, not exhaustively, but highlighting particular moments in his life, I want to think about Josiah under this heading, working with God.

What Josiah achieved, what we're told of in the passage that we read, and indeed other achievements that we haven't read about but that are recorded for us, what Josiah achieved is nothing short of breathtaking.

And you'll have to take that on trust, because as I say, we haven't the time to go through all his achievements. Suffice it to say that over the course of his life, he had the courage and resolve to carry through a series of reforms that transformed Judah from being a nation steeped in ignorance, idolatry, and immorality to a nation in renewed covenant with God.

[17 : 22] How did he achieve this? How did this young man achieve this? Now, allow me just for a moment to take a step back and look at things from a different perspective from the one that we might immediately turn to as to that question or answering that question.

How did he achieve this? How was he able to carry through all of these reforms? Some historians of the period point out that the reforms of Josiah, as they are recorded for us in the Bible, coincide quite intriguingly and chronologically with stages in the gradual decline of Assyrian political and military dominance in the region.

Just to give that background, at the time of Josiah, the dominant power was the Assyrian Empire. And historians tell us that that empire was in decline, and that coincided with Josiah's reign.

And not only so in a general way, but the particular times where Josiah is spoken of as introducing reforms, and we're given the historical data in the chapter that we read.

So, for example, in verse 3, we read, in the second half of the verse, in his twelfth year, presumably that refers to the twelfth year of his reign, so when he was 20 years old, in his twelfth year, he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places.

[18 : 46] And then in verse 8, we have another historical reference, where we're told, in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, to purify the land and the temple he sent, and it goes on.

So, there's those two particular years that are referred to, the twelfth and the eighteenth year of his reign. And intriguingly, the twelfth and the eighteenth year of his reign coincide with events that resulted in the loosening of Assyrian control.

Now, this being so, one reading of Josiah's reform could be that they were politically driven, asserting Judah's sovereignty in territories previously controlled by Assyria.

And in the passage, we're told how his reforms extended beyond Jerusalem. There's almost this attempt to gain control over a wider radius of territory. So, we could say, well, what he did was politically driven.

We might even say that it was opportunistic. Only a set of fortuitous circumstances making these reforms possible. So, what are we to choose? Are we to say that these reforms were driven by a commitment to God, a loyalty to God, a passion for God, or were they simply the actions of a king who was wisely making use of and taking advantage of circumstances?

[20 : 05] Well, I don't think we need to choose between these two options. We don't need to choose between the heroic, religiously motivated covenant king described in Scripture, or simply see behind the grand headlines and admire a pragmatic opportunist who saw an opportunity and grasped it.

We don't need to choose between the two. Rather, I would suggest that what we are seeing is God and Josiah working together. It is true that in the scenario of total Assyrian domination of Judah, Josiah most probably would not have been able to carry out the reforms in the manner that he did, even if he had wanted to.

He wouldn't have been able to. The dominating power would not have permitted him to do, even if he had wanted to. And so again we say, well, was he just fortunate?

Well, let me suggest this interpretation of the events. Josiah decides for God and driven by a fierce loyalty to his God and with essentially religious or spiritual objectives in mind, decides to bring the nation back to God.

And God honors Josiah's vision and orders even the politics of 7th century B.C. world to facilitate and ensure the success of Josiah's reformation.

[21 : 32] And so the decline of Assyria is not simply circumstantial. God is behind it. God is the one ordering even the politics of the world to facilitate the godly objectives of his godly king.

But in the big picture of this working together of God and Josiah, let's be clear that the one who takes the initiative ultimately is not Josiah, but God.

It's interesting that if we turn to 1 Kings chapter 13 and verse 2, and we won't turn to it and read it now, but let me just mention what is said there. It's a prophecy. It's a prophecy that was made 300 years before.

And it speaks curiously of Josiah, and it mentions him by name taking the throne in Judah.

By name. That's very unusual that you would have somebody prophesied by name. And so it's very clear that in the big picture it's God who is ordering all of these things.

[22 : 33] But God uses this godly man and his godly desires for the fulfilling of God's purpose. God is in control, and he continues to honor those who are loyal to him, opening the most unlikely doors in the most unlikely ways, as he did with and for Josiah.

So God and Josiah work together, and that is how things continue to operate. God continues to work with his people. God honors the loyalty and the passion and the zeal and the commitment of his people.

And he orders the events, be they of our own individual circumstances, or even the events of world politics, to secure the fulfilling of his purposes.

God and Josiah working together. Let me just mention a final moment in Josiah's life. And in a way, it's going back to the beginning, certainly going back to the beginning in terms of the reading.

And I'm giving this the heading, a fitting epitaph. You know, I began by asking, what would you like written on your gravestone? If God were to write the inscription on your gravestone, what would he write?

[23 : 49] The description of Josiah, found there in verse 2 of chapter 34, provides, as I suggested already, a summary of his life in accurate and very fitting terms.

And we read it again. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left. Let's just think a little bit about that epitaph.

If we want to use that description of it, though, strictly speaking, that's not what it is. I think there are three elements in it that I want to just highlight. And with this, we draw things to a close.

First of all, we're told of Josiah, he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. I think there are two very important things that are stated or implicit in this description of Josiah.

He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Firstly, Josiah knew that God was the final arbiter in matters of right and wrong. And so when he wanted to decide, well, what's right and what's wrong, he didn't go to his advisors.

[24 : 55] He didn't say, well, what do you think's right? What do you think's wrong? He went to the book of the covenant. He listened to the word of God and there he discovered what was right and what was wrong. It was the word of God that would determine what was right and what was wrong.

And that is, of course, an ever contemporary truth. And particularly so in our own day and generation when we're told that right and wrong is negotiable.

It's evolving. It's up for grabs. It's the view of the majority. So what was right yesterday is wrong today. What was wrong yesterday is right today. And it's an ever-evolving picture, a very confusing, chaotic picture where everybody can choose what's right and what's wrong.

Josiah knew differently. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, first of all, because he acknowledged God's prerogative to determine what is right and what is wrong. And not only his prerogative, but his gracious sharing with us of that truth in his word.

But then secondly, his primary concern was not the opinion of those around him, but the opinion of God. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

[26 : 02] His life was lived in conscious recognition that God was there with him. The eyes of the Lord were upon him. And so he acted and he behaved and he determined and he issued his decrees, conscious of the eyes of God upon him.

Now at one level, that would have been very comforting for him when there were those opposing him. Perhaps sometimes it was quite threatening to him. When perhaps he was tempted to do that which was not right, he would recall, he would remember, the eyes of the Lord are on me.

And so he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. That's the first thing we're told about him. But we're told also that he walked in the ways of his father, David. You know, in the Christian life, there's very few points given for originality.

You know, you're not called to be original. You're not called to reinvent the wheel. You're not called to do your own thing. That's not what you're called to do. That's not what we're called to do. Really what we're called to do is to imitate, to copy those who have gone before us.

And what you need to do is to copy the right people, to imitate the right people. Josiah walked in the ways of his father, David. He chose well. Who he would walk like.

[27 : 18] So I would say to you, walk like David. Do as Josiah. Be like Jesus. And remember, it's not just about what you believe in your head, but how you walk out there in your work, on campus, with your friends, in your relationship.

It's how you walk that matters. Josiah walked in the ways of his father, David. But then finally, we're told about Josiah in this little summary of his life.

Not turning aside to the right or to the left. Again, the language is very vivid, very striking, and almost doesn't require much commentary.

But let me just say this. The church needs men and women like Josiah. Scotland needs women and men like Josiah. Josiah. Men who know in whom they have believed and know for what great purpose they have been called.

Women who have fixed their eyes upon Jesus and have resolved that their lives will be lived to the glory of God, not turning aside to the right, not turning aside to the left, despite all the pressure to do so, despite the mockery that comes with walking straight ahead.

[28 : 31] And so at work, telling the truth. in your relationships, obeying God's word, not turning to the right, not turning to the left, not doing your own thing, not doing what others tell you to do, but remaining firmly and solidly on God's path.

That was true of Josiah, not turning aside to the right or to the left. We live in days devoid of direction.

Perhaps it's ever been so in greater or lesser measure. Most haven't a clue where they're going and even less of a notion how to get there. Our challenge as the people of God, as the church of Jesus Christ, is not only to point people in the right direction, but to take the lead and walk ahead, not turning aside to the right or the left, with our eyes, with your eyes, fixed upon Jesus.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you are a God who can be sought and found. We thank you that you are the God who makes yourself known.

We thank you that ultimately you are the one who seeks us out. You're the God who sent Jesus to seek and to save that which was lost. And we thank you that we can count ourselves among those who have been found by Jesus, who have been rescued and saved by Jesus.

[29 : 56] We pray that as we gratefully acknowledge that it would be our desire to live our lives in a manner that is pleasing to Jesus and of blessing and of service to others.

We do thank you for the life of Josiah. We thank you that you are the God who prophesied his coming. You're the God who determined the circumstances of his reign. You're the God who raised him up.

You're the God who turned his heart to yourself. And we thank you that you're the God who continues to work in similar fashion in the lives of men and women today.

We pray that it would be true of us, that it would be increasingly true of us as your people, that we are those who seek to do what is right in your eyes, that we are those who walk in the ways that you have established, that we are those who do not turn aside to the right or to the left.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.