

Manasseh: Worst King in Judah?

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[0 : 00] Now, we have just read chapter 21 of 1 Kings, the life of Manasseh, and I haven't forgotten about the third psalm, but there's a natural division here, so I want to first of all look at the life of Manasseh as it is presented to us in 2 Kings chapter 21.

Now, what put, well, if it was a title, we could think of this as Manasseh, the worst king of Judah ever, question mark. When we were taking the girls down to camp, and having discussed this, I think I may be guilty of lateral thinking, but we were listening to the radio, and Jeremy Vine was on, and at that time, the discussion was about Raoul Mote, and it was a Thursday when his mother apparently had issued a statement which effectively disowned him, or certainly effectively declared that the son she knew was dead, and this was not anything recognizable from the age of 19 as her son.

And the question that was raised, and which people were discussing, was just how far does someone have to go, or can go, before a parent could legitimately disown them?

And I, as I was driving along, as you do, you start thinking, and I started thinking about, well, what would constitute that? And for some reason, the case of Manasseh came into mind.

Now, Manasseh is actually quite an amazing story. He had all the advantages of upbringing within a Christian home. If you read the previous few chapters, his father was Hezekiah, a good and godly king of Israel.

[1 : 52] I was going to say, when I first started thinking about this, I'd grown up with the idea that Manasseh was the fruit of the extra 15 years that Hezekiah had been granted after he pled with God not to take his life when he was ill.

But it turns out that current thinking, those who know about such things, that is not the way it was looked at. To make all the dates of the kings fit together, it appears that a common practice in the ancient Near East was to have co-regency.

So when a child or a son, the heir to the throne, became of age, he would reign jointly, presumably as a junior partner with his father. So it's currently thought that Manasseh was co-regent with Hezekiah for approximately 10 years, the last 10 years of Hezekiah's life.

And of course, Hezekiah, unlike most other kings, knew exactly when he was going to die because he'd been told, you're getting 15 more years. And so he could plan his affairs in ways that most people can't.

So then Manasseh was a king. That's the highest stratum of society. He had godly influences. But yet, as we look at the 10 years that if he possibly did have the co-regency, one can't help but ask who influenced whom.

[3 : 18] Hezekiah was an old man, and some of the things he did in his latter years don't seem to have been the wisest. In fact, he started showing off the temple treasures to embassy visitors from Babylon.

Now, apart from the fact that he shouldn't have done that because what was in the temple was sacred and he shouldn't have shown it anyway, but common sense surely tells you that if you are dealing with a power, a political power that is in the ascendancy and has a desire and a reputation for annexing tasty neighboring kingdoms, you don't start showing them all the juicy bits that might make you attractive to them.

But why did he take this course of action? Was it perhaps that this teenage king was starting to influence the old man rather than the other way around?

It wouldn't be the first time that has happened. He also had the longest reign of any king of Israel. From the time he started, 12 to his death, he reigned for 55 years.

So he had every opportunity to repent. But the one thing that we can take from this is despite the godly upbringing and the influence and interaction and partnership with a godly father, as soon as his father died, he did his best to throw, as we would say, throw over the traces of that upbringing.

[4 : 51] Now, he is the first king of Israel, the first king of Judah rather, who did not have a neighboring kingdom of Israel to contend with or interact with.

They had been swept away and replaced by, you might say, demographic planning by the Assyrians several years prior to his ascension to the throne.

So politically, he was directly neighboring an artificial kingdom and was ruled, he was a vassal of the Assyrians.

Now, he may well have been quite happy with that. He sent his tribute in and they left him alone to rule his kingdom, more or less as he pleased, as long as he didn't do anything to rock the political boat.

So one can speculate what was going on in Manasseh's mind and why would he have thought about these things. He could have had a fascination with this most civilized culture that he was part of.

[5 : 55] Assyria was the biggest civilization at the time and their religion might have been fascinating to him as well. And so he started to dabble in these things and to introduce these into Israel.

He introduced the Asherah, Ashtoreth, a goddess associated quite openly with fertility. He did everything that he'd been commanded, they'd been commanded not to do.

Mediums, spiritists, witches were all supposed to have been put out of Israel and Judah, but he introduced them. The Assyrians were into astrology and the starting to have names for all the planets and star systems.

And he was interested and got involved in that. Basically, he introduced paganism in a big way into Judah. Not that they needed much persuading because they had these tendencies anyway, any opportunity to cast aside the worship of Yahweh and worship anything else.

But when you look at it, Asherahs, mediums, spiritists, the host of heaven, Manasseh must have been a very broad-minded and open-minded man.

[7 : 10] He was willing to try anything, anything except one thing, the living and true God. That he had laid aside. He introduced bales. Now, bal, I am told, simply means lord or master.

And it tended to be used for all the deities round about. So there were particular bales that different nations worshipped. And to the nations round about, Yahweh would just have been another bale.

And Hezekiah had to put up with the kings of Assyria saying, don't think your God will protect you because none of the other gods of the nations round about have protected you against my great nation.

And the gods that are, I suppose, basically serving me and who work with me. And perhaps Manasseh thought, well, God hasn't really helped Israel. They've been wiped out.

We have the same God. And so let's look at some of the other ones. And of course, that would have been the attitude of the Assyrians. He didn't help Israel. We were able to wipe them out.

[8 : 20] And so He brought these pagan things into not just the land, but into the temple. And on top of that, He did something that was actually quite rare.

It wasn't actually even that common, I am told, in pagan practices. And that is, He actually sacrificed one of His sons. Now, we can gloss over that and just by reading something, you don't really get the picture of just how bad these things were.

We can get the picture from the way He is described. He is associated with Ahab. No other king of Judah had been likened to Ahab. He is likened to the Amorites.

And the Amorites were the nation in Canaan that the Israelites were destroyed because they were so evil. And yet, in God's sight, Manasseh went further.

Now, it wouldn't be helpful to imagine things, but it would be like the offense to the people of Judah who were faithful. And there were some who were faithful to the worship of the living and true God.

[9 : 27] What would be like coming into this building one day and discovering that there was some pagan ritual going on in this corner, a seance going on in the other corner, and pornographic images and symbols surrounding the rest of the building.

That's how offensive and how degraded the whole thing had become. And this goes on. So that said, Manasseh is trying all these things, and God warns him.

This whole action is provoking God to anger. God is incredibly patient with Manasseh.

He has allowed him to reign longer than any other king. God's patience will not allow himself to be besmirched indefinitely.

But when he does come to the people of Judah and to Manasseh, he does so actually in quite a gentle way. Because first of all, he gives reference to the temple and what he has promised to David and Solomon and what he has promised about his presence in the temple.

[10 : 44] And that is a remembrance. He is pointing back to something they would have known about. That the promises, the positive promises he has made, that to encourage them, that there is a way back.

Because he says, even under judgment, if my people will humble themselves and pray, which is the other side of what this promise was, when God talks about setting his name in Jerusalem and in the temple, he also said, when I judge you, if you turn and humble yourselves and pray, I will remember and I will lift the judgment.

So there's always a conditional element to these judgments. But then it goes further and it gets explicit.

The remembrance is not simply, come to me, return, remember the better ways, remember what you should be. But a bigger hint, the prophets actually come and explicitly state what is going to happen in very graphic terms.

It's going to be spilt out, wiped up, an empty plate, nice and clean, ready for something else. You are rubbish, you need to be dispensed with.

[11 : 57] But again, this is always a conditional. And he has done all this and he has ignored all that. And the people of Israel continue to ignore it. And then, in verse 16, we are told that, moreover, Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood, he filled Jerusalem from end to end.

And we can think of people like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, various people throughout history, who we think are the most evil of recent times. Because that is the description that there was of them.

This place is Manasseh. As a pretty scary guy you don't want to cross, evil guy. Now, it's interesting, well, it struck me as strange that this, moreover, Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood, is at the end of all this.

It's almost like an afterthought. Of course, it's not an afterthought. It's more of on top of all this. But there is an emphasis. The most important things are the spiritual things.

What is the relationship with God? The first four commandments is against the last six. How we react to God. How we react to man. Of course, the one is related to the other.

[13 : 12] It sends a picture. Because although murder, as he is in it, is an absolutely heinous crime worthy itself of death, it is so because it is itself an attack on God.

The ultimate pinnacle of God's creation is man. He is, humanity is God's image. To attack and kill man or woman is to destroy or attempt to destroy the image of God.

But there's another side to it. Jesus has said, don't fear those who are able to harm and destroy the body, and after that they can do nothing. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.

And the innocent blood that was being shed, some of it probably appears in Hebrews 11 amongst the catalog of the faithful, is dead, they're murdered, but they are with Christ after that.

They cannot be destroyed. One apocryphal story, to show how far Manasseh would go, the scribes at the time attributed to Manasseh the death and murder of Isaiah by being sawn in two through a tree trunk is a pretty horrific thing to do.

[14 : 36] And Hebrews 11 does refer to people being sawn in two, who were unworthy of this, who were two, of whom the world was not worthy. But then, if you think about the other side of it, what he did and led astray, how he led Judah astray, was spiritual murder.

Because, whilst this innocent blood could be, that was it, that part was over, to lead a nation into idolatry, into destruction, in terms of their spiritual lives, is far more serious.

Because then they didn't listen to the prophets when they spoke to them. Because Manasseh had led them so far down the path of destruction.

So what happens then is, when they die, they are going to hell. They have been murdered spiritually, they are dead spiritually, and their life, unless they repent, is no further forward.

So that's why I think the emphasis here is on the spiritual, and that the physical murder is, whilst heinous, is not given the central place, although we might consider it starker.

[15 : 54] But then there's a result. And the result is given in 2 Kings 24, verse 3, where it says, Well, verse 2, The Lord sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite, and Ammonite raiders against him.

He sent them to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the Lord, proclaimed by his servants the prophets. Surely these things happened to Judah, according to the Lord's command, in order to remove them from his presence, because of the sins of Manasseh, and all he had done, including the shedding of innocent blood.

So all that he had done, led to, has consequences, further down the line, and that Judah was then taken off into exile for 70 years. So, we can think then of Manasseh as being this really bad guy.

But when you look at what he is guilty of, we have to ask the question, What about us? This passage speaks to every single one of us, as we're gathered here. Robert Murray McShane, a minister of the 19th century, a very godly young man, he died when he was 30, but, I couldn't find a quotation, but I'm sure I remember having been told, he said, and I agree with him, that he could look inside his own heart, and he could see the seed of every single sin that you could think of.

And that is true. The heart is deceitful above all things. And yes, we all have tastes, and some things don't appeal to us, but insofar as we have a proneness to sin, there is no sin that we are not capable of, given the right circumstance, I believe.

[17 : 30] So we can't really stand in judgment on anyone. The thing about being a Christian is not to say that I am better than you are. All we can say is, I am no better than you are.

But there is a hope. We have to, the reason for that is, that we have to look at things from God's perspective. Idolatry is placing anything in the place of God, on his throne, in our hearts, and in our societies, or wherever we are gathered.

The temple in 2 Kings was a building in Jerusalem. Since Christ came, the temple is everywhere. God is worshipped wherever people are gathered.

Together. It is not bricks and mortar. Culture and the civilization around us can permeate all our minds. I remember, I'm old enough to remember, when the Sex Pistols, punk rock, first came on the scene in 1976.

And one thing that struck me at that, there was Johnny Rotten, who's the lead singer, I think, of the Sex Pistols, was interviewed. I can't even remember the name of the interviewer. But he, for the first time in television, used the F word.

[18 : 43] That was shocking. The man who interviewed him, not Johnny Rotten, he wasn't employed, but was sacked for allowing Johnny Rotten to say this. And yet for decades, for years prior to that, the name of God and the name of Christ had been quite freely abused, taken in vain through the media and still is.

In fact, there are still words you cannot use in the media, but God and Christ are not amongst them. So we have things back to front.

Why is the greatest name, the greatest word in the universe treated so cheaply when Anglo-Saxon crudities are shocking to society?

We may not murder, but as Christ said, if you've been angry with anyone, that seed, that has its outworking in murder as part of us. And so, if we stopped there, all we have in this picture from 2 Kings is a very negative picture of Manasseh.

And as we look at it, it's a very negative picture of humanity and of our hearts. But fortunately, that's not the end of the story. There is another side to this story which is not proclaimed, presented in 2 Kings 21.

[20 : 10] And I'd like to look at that. Okay, this time, if you turn to 2 Chronicles chapter 33, and that's on page 467 in the Pew Bibles.

The first part of the chapter is basically the same as in 2 Kings chapter 21. But then there's an additional part which starts at verse 10.

The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people but they paid no attention. So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon in his distress.

He sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea.

So he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God. Afterwards he rebuilt the outer wall of the city of David west of the Gihon Spring in the valley as far as the entrance of the fish gate and encircling the hill of Ophel.

[21 : 27] He also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah. He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem and he threw them out of the city.

Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it and told Judah to serve the Lord the God of Israel. The people however continued to sacrifice at the high places but only to the Lord their God.

The other events of Manasseh's reign including his prayer to his God and the words the seer spoke to him in the name of the Lord the God of Israel are written in the annals of the kings of Israel. His prayer and how God was moved by his entreaty as well as all his sins and unfaithfulness and the sites where he built high places and set up Asherah poles and idols before he humbled himself are all written in the records of the seers.

Manasseh rested with his fathers and was buried in his palace and Ammon his son succeeded him as king. Ammon was 22 years old when he became king and he reigned in Jerusalem for two years.

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

[22 : 49] Ammon increased his guilt. Ammon's officials conspired against him and assassinated him in his palace and the people of the land killed all who had plotted against King Ammon and they made Josiah his son king in his place.

Amen. May the Lord bless his reading to us again. So the other side of the story is that God's patience and mercy and grace were manifested in Manasseh in this 55 years of his reign God used to his glory in the conversion of Manasseh.

Psalms 117 that we sang just now is a catalogue of examples of different ways in which God draws people to himself through extremity.

We can think of extremity as being God's judgment but very often it is God's way of bringing people to an end of themselves of their self-reliance and making them look to him and this was the case in the case of Manasseh.

Now having read around a few things probably historically quite trivial but there is some thought that Manasseh made a political mistake.

[24 : 12] Things were going well for him but one of the kings Ezerhaddon had made his son Ashurbanipal heir who had then taken over when Ezerhadron had died and during his reign there appears to have been a rebellion of his brother who was a viceroy of a region of Babylon and whose name I'm not even going to try and pronounce and it appears that there's a possibility that Manasseh along with the king king of Egypt saw this as an opportune moment to try and to support the rebellion in order to be able to shake off the yoke of Assyria and gain some degree of autonomy for themselves.

Unfortunately the rebellion failed and the attempt at independence also failed. Now if you're a king or an emperor who needs to have some stability and wants to keep control over a large area of land of various political and cultural colours and outlooks you have to act strongly and the tendency then was to make examples and so it looks like Ashurbanipal did not want to act mildly towards the Egyptian and Judaic king and what tended to happen then was total and utter humiliation.

So this is what happens to Manasseh he is dragged out of Jerusalem with hooks and the hook goes through the nose and noses are quite sensitive that's why some animals have hooks through their noses so they can be controlled quite easily stick a rope on the end of that hook and you can make them do whatever you want he was taken presumably had to walk with this hook in his nose and bronze shackles from Jerusalem to Babylon which isn't exactly an afternoon stroll so he would be in no fit state or a pretty awful state by the time he got there the whole purpose of this was to send a message that I'm in charge you are nothing you are just dross you have no power you have no authority you basically have no existence and I can do with you what I like and in most cases apparently this ended up in death but in the case of

Manasseh it didn't end up in death he was thrown in jail and here in this totally abused isolated abused situation he really did hit rock bottom he had no hope he probably still thought that death was his only out and in that situation we could possibly describe his total abasement as the nearest thing to hell on earth and in that situation he turns around and he has time to contemplate the history of his nation the God who has been merciful to him all that has been said to him by the prophets and bear in mind Isaiah who was one of the most thorough prophets or most comprehensive prophets had been around for at least part of his life and he may have remembered some of this and there's an absolutely beautiful phrase I think it struck me it just jumped out at me in verse 12 in his distress he sought the favor of the

Lord his God not simply he sought the favor of God or the God of his father so it says that later or the God of Hezekiah but the Lord his God and the writer of Chronicles is here recognizing that even in this state there is something in Manasseh he is God's child God is his God there is ownership there is relationship there and it gives hope it is a moving passage it tells us that this prayer that he then utters when he calls upon God is no empty prayer one hears the prayers the trivial prayers that people in extreme do Lord get me out of this and I'll do this I'll do that which nearly always ends up if people get out of the situation well did I really say that I'm sure I meant something less than that but this was an absolute sincere prayer he voluntarily humbled himself when you think about his situation there wasn't much more humility or humiliation but there's plenty of pride that could be removed and here he was a broken sinner before God in a state of true repentance repentance repentance is a turning around a change of mind a recognition that what you have been doing is wrong and that the 180 degree opposite direction

[29 : 40] God's way is the right way and that repentance finds its parallel or its sister in faith and there can be no doubt I think that this was a picture of a man who has been converted he has turned to Christ in the spirit of what is known as an Old Testament saint this faith in the Christ who 600 years in the future would die as we heard this morning would show forth the most amazing display of love for his people in going to the cross now we mentioned Isaiah Isaiah spoke to Manasseh's grandfather Ahaz another wicked king and had promised him or not promised him but through him and speaking to him promised that a virgin would be with child and that she would bring forth a son whose name would be

Emmanuel which is God with us Christ and then you have and Manasseh may have known this you have the most amazing statements in Isaiah chapter 53 from verse 4 surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows yet we considered him stricken by God smitten by him and afflicted but he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed we all like sheep have gone astray each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all now it would be very hard to understand that the Ethiopian eunuch that Philip met in the desert didn't understand it but if the spirit opens your eyes and Manasseh maybe did had his eyes opened he could certainly see that there was a promise and as Abraham had a promise of a future son and God counted his belief in that promise as righteousness so Manasseh in believing the promises of God would be counted as righteous in God's sight and this is something that is open to every single one of us here tonight to look to

Christ but what of the justice of this here's Manasseh a man a man who has abused just about everything he has broken every single law he has lived the most awful life does he just get off scot free by simply saying I'm sorry in a sense but it's not just about saying sorry it's about being sorry and that sorrow links and that belief links to Christ and it's what Christ did that matters not what we have done to believe in Christ is to be united to the object of that belief and that is Christ himself it's called imputation so when God looks on Christ he sees the sin of his people that's why Christ had to suffer on the tree on the cross of Golgotha our sin was laid upon him his righteousness is laid upon Manasseh so when God looks at Manasseh he sees Christ and this justice is completely balanced

Christ underwent more suffering than any other human being ever has or ever will he went through hell now there's a picture of hell that is popularized of devils and red tridents prodding people and fire and brimstone now no doubt there is a physical aspect to hell but that's not what hell is about hell is simply the place where there is no love no hope no joy no friendship there's just total loneliness total guilt total hatred total utter and complete despair because this is the wrath of God in in in in getting the picture of what hell means there is a simply it can be summed up in nine words we see that picture when Christ bearing the sins of his people said my God my God why have you forsaken me complete and utter desolation a fearful prospect but how do we know then that manasseh what is the why should we think he was converted

I mean apart from the fact that basically the picture here of him being as God we have the advantage of being told that he was but the evidence is here faith without works is dead faith what we believe doesn't matter what it is will manifest itself in how we act so if we say I believe I can juggle if we can juggle it will be manifested by balls up in the air we can't juggle our belief will be shown to be false by balls strewn about the floor but the attempt shows that we actually did believe we could juggle so evidence works flow from faith and in manasseh's case this was a complete turnaround he goes back he is free no doubt Ashurbanipal had the good political reasons for sending manasseh back to Israel to renew his place on the throne but as David preached a few months ago the hands of king the heart of the king is in God's hands and he just can maneuver him like a water course what Ashurbanipal thought he was doing for his political ends

[35 : 48] God was using for his ends and manasseh goes back he tears down the altars in the temple clears everything out sets things back to what they should be demonstrating that he is now truly a worshipper of God now of course he isn't wholly successful the people sort of go along with what he's saying they'll worship God but they're going to do it in the high places and this is sadly often the case it's much easier to lead people into error than it is to lead people back into the truth so the answer to the question that started this was how far can someone go to be worthy of being disowned and I think there was a gospel singer a few decades ago still around called Don Francisco some of the words of his songs tend to stick in my mind and one of them in this context stuck in my mind with God speaking there's no sin you can imagine that is stronger than my love and that is true to look to Christ there is nothing that man could conceive of that is so evil that it is beyond the love of Christ if you will believe in him now it's too late for Raoul Mote when I start thinking about this he was still alive there's a tragedy with his whole life and how things turned out but it's not too late for anyone else gathered here it's not too late for us as Christians to go forth and there's two conclusions we can draw from Manasseh firstly from a point of view of the church for evangelism rich, poor, good, bad whatever terms we wish to use

God blesses his word it's not that we can focus on the poor or focus on the rich focus on people we think are ripe for preaching we don't know God has promised he will bless his word wherever we take it we tend to focus on well I don't think that person is ready for it and that can work both ways I know people who have been how do we evangelize this guy he's too good he's such a nice guy he's not going to listen and I know someone he's a lovely Christian because he actually heard the gospel people didn't know how to proclaim the gospel but when he heard it he realized he was a sinner and he needed Christ and he turned and we may look at someone like even a Hitler or a Stalin and we look in our mind and think wow they're so evil they're not the gospel is for everyone Aberdeen's an affluent city there are I'm sure many Manassees out there there are poor people there are rich people we have the gospel that we know if God chooses to bless it nothing is going to stop that but perhaps you are a Manassee perhaps you haven't turned to Christ this call that came to Manassee comes to you it comes to all of us there's a royal if you get a royal command here

God now commands all men everywhere to repent and believe the gospel if we received a telegram from the queen or replaced queen by someone you hold in high regard that you'd be honored to receive a command or request to come but if you received a request from the queen or the monarch it would be an honor to go and dine or meet with them and the king of the universe commands our presence our turning from sin and from everything that's bad to everything that's good Manassee found mercy in 55 years despite all he had done that no one should lose hope there is no despair there is always hope but there's no room for presumption I read the part the few verses about Ammon Ammon only lived reigned rather for two years he didn't repent there was no turning at that point so we cannot presume

I don't know what's going to happen when we walk out the doors I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow I only know that the gospel comes to each and every one of you and to us today no one is too bad and no one is too good we all deserve death if you think that you are good enough unless you are every moment of every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every month of every year living absolutely and completely and 100% without doubt without wavering for the glory of God and for him alone that's not true of you then you are a sinner and the distance between you and Manasseh if you can see the gap in my fingers compared to the infinite gap that there is between all of us and the holiness and moral perfection of God we all need Christ so here's the thing why risk the pains of hell which are nothing but doom desolation despair and despondency for what there is in Christ peace joy love everything that's actually fun it's best summed up

I think in the words of Psalm 16 verse 11 you will show me the path of life of joys there is full store before your face at your right hand are pleasures evermore and that is what being in Christ brings you let us pray let us pray