

## Manasseh, the Prodigal King

**2 Kings 20:21 -21:18**

**2 Chronicles 33:10-20**

**Series: Old Testament Character Studies**

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I am sure that many of you have things in your life that you would like to be able to forget, memories that from time to time come back to haunt you. I know that I do. Many things in my past make me feel guilty, defiled, and unacceptable. Time and again I have had to turn to the Scriptures to find release from a sense of guilt about my past, and I have discovered that there is encouragement and instruction there which sets me free. The story of Manasseh has ministered to me in this respect, so I want to share with you some things the Lord has taught me from the life of this character: King Manasseh, the prodigal king. The account begins at verse 21 of 2 Kings 20:

**So Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and Manasseh his son became king in his place. Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Hephzibah.**

Manasseh was the son of Hezekiah, who was one of the few kings in David's line, the kings of Judah, called "good." Most of them were evil, Hezekiah was responsible for a spiritual revival during his reign that swept the entire nation. He did away with the idolatry that his father, Ahaz, had established, and purged the nation of apostasy. We know that the prophetic ministry of Isaiah and Micah helped him in his reign, whose writings are preserved for us in the Scriptures. There were a couple of invasions of Judah during this time by Sennacherib, the king of Assyria. On both of these occasions the Lord used Hezekiah and Isaiah to protect Jerusalem. Although almost all of the land of Judah was devastated by the Assyrians, the capital city was preserved. Isaiah said that Jerusalem looked like a caretaker's hut in the midst of a cucumber field. All the fortified cities had been destroyed but Jerusalem was left. It was Hezekiah's wise leadership that made possible the preservation of the city and its people. He was a powerful spiritual force in Judah.

Manasseh came to the throne when he was twelve years old. He reigned for about ten years as co-regent with his father. Then when Manasseh was twenty-two his father died and he took over the reins of government. It is helpful to keep in our mind something of the heritage that this young man enjoyed. He had a godly father and lived in a time of spiritual vitality and prosperity. He had the words of the prophets Isaiah and Micah ringing in his ears. He had seen the Lord deliver Jerusalem in a very miraculous way when it was under siege by the Assyrians. And yet note what he did, verse 2:

**And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel.**

The nations referred to here are the Canaanite nations that were expelled by Joshua and the twelve tribes when they first entered the land. The Canaanites worshipped sex. Archaeologists have confirmed that this civilization was shot through with venereal disease. Even the children were infected, which explains, in some measure, the wars of extermination. And yet the Scriptures say that Manasseh *outdid* the Canaanite nations in his wickedness. Note verse 9 of chapter 21, "...Manasseh seduced them to do evil *more* than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel," and verse 11, "...having done wickedly *more* than all the Amorites did who were before him..." He was more wicked than the nations that God drove from the land when the Israelites took possession of it.

Verses 3 through 9 explain the abominations that Manasseh introduced. First,

**...he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed...**

The father of Hezekiah was Ahaz. Ahaz had built these "high places," groves on the tops of hills throughout Judah where idols were worshipped. Hezekiah destroyed them. Manasseh built them again.

**...and he erected altars for Baal...**

Baal was the chief Phoenician deity.

**and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done.**

An Asherah was a female deity representing the goddess of sex and fertility. Many scholars believe that the monuments built in her honor were phallic symbols. Manasseh introduced this Assyrian sex cult into the nation of Israel.

**...and worshipped all the host of heaven and served them.**

He worshipped the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, and practiced astrology.

**And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem I will put My name."  
For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.**

He placed altars to foreign gods in the temple itself--in the outer court, and in the holy place where the priests worshipped.

**And he made his son pass through the fire.**

He sacrificed his own baby son to Molech, the god of the Amorites. And he

**...practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists.**

The Hebrew is much stronger here than the English translation. He actually took mediums and spiritists and those who dealt in the occult and placed them in positions of leadership.

**Then [as though this were not enough] he set the carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house of which the Lord said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever. And I will not make the feet of Israel wander any more from the land which I gave their fathers, if only they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that My servant Moses commanded them."**

He took these phallic symbols, these monuments he had built in honor of the goddess of sex, and he put them in the Holy of Holies, in the place where the Spirit of God dwelt.

Now, it is significant that nowhere in this account is there any mention of the worship of Jehovah. Manasseh selected his pantheon from all the cultures surrounding Israel--from the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Phoenicians--but not one reference is made to the worship of the God of Israel. Only He was excluded. Again, verse 9 says, in summary, that:

**Manasseh seduced them to do evil more than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel.**

Verse 10:

**Now the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets, saying "Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab. '"**

"As a surveyor would take a transit and level out a place on which to build," the Lord said, "that is what I am going to do to Jerusalem. I will level it as I leveled Samaria and the house of Ahab. The measure of extermination that the northern kingdom of Israel and the house of Ahab experienced is what Jerusalem is going to experience."

**"...and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down."**

What a vivid picture! There will not be one thing left--total extermination.

**"And I will abandon the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become as plunder and spoil to all their enemies because they have done evil in My sight, and have been provoking Me to anger, since the day their fathers came from Egypt, even to this day."**

There are a couple of things I want you to note. The first is this: Manasseh obviously was a wicked man. He was perhaps the most wicked king that ever reigned over Judah. He did things which no king had ever done before. He led Judah in doing things which no nation had ever done before. And yet which of us can sit in judgment upon him? We all can look back into our lives and see that we have done the same things! It is only a question of degree. We may not have worshipped Baal and Asherah per se, but we have worshipped other things. We have set up other idols in our lives. We worship our vocation, or the pursuit of a degree, or our house, or some boy or girl, or man or woman. Or we may quite literally set up a phallic symbol in our own spirits, the Holy of Holies of man, and worship sex. So we all can look back on our lives and see that we are just as guilty as Manasseh, just as worthy of judgment. That is the first thing we need to recognize.

The second thing I want you to observe is the procedure that the Lord undertakes in order to reclaim his man. God loved Manasseh, and because he loved him he would not let him continue to live in rebellion. First he spoke very quietly to him. As Manasseh began to indulge in these idolatrous practices God said, "Manasseh, Jerusalem is where my name is placed." That is, "Jerusalem is My possession. You have no right to set up any other gods there." And then when Manasseh didn't listen, God's voice came with greater clarity and insistence. He reminded him of his promises, both positive and negative--promises of blessing if Manasseh would obey and of judgment if he did not. And finally God thundered at him through the prophets so that everywhere Manasseh turned he was faced with the voice of God. He could not avoid it.

Have you had that experience when you have turned from the Lord? First, the Lord will speak to us in that gentle, quiet, gracious way of his. He reminds us that we belong to him. If we don't listen he speaks with greater clarity through his word, and through his Spirit, witnessing to our spirit. And then if we still don't listen he surrounds us with many witnesses to the truth, so that everywhere we turn we hear the voice of God. We can't get away. In times when I have been in headlong flight from the Lord, even when I think I've gotten away scot-free, I hear him say, "Psst, here I am!" I turn on the radio and, "Psst," there he is! I feel like David; if I made my bed in hell I would hear his voice, "Here I am!" I can't get away from Him.

I had an appointment with a student at Stanford one day. I was waiting for him in front of the chapel, but he was late. There was another student sitting on a park bench there so I sat and started to chat with him. I discovered that he was born in China. That was interesting to me and so I asked him a bit about his past. The Lord opened an opportunity to share the gospel with him and to tell him of the Lord's love for him. But as I began to speak he got red in the face and very angry, and he jumped up to his feet! His reaction was so unusually adverse that I was really surprised. I asked him what was wrong. "Well," he said, "I guess the reason I am reacting this way is that I was born and raised in a Christian home. My parents were missionaries in China. And all my life I have been running away from God. But everywhere I go God sends someone to talk to me about my relationship with him." I said, "Brother, I can really identify with you!" God has been called, with reverent affection, "the Hound of Heaven" because everywhere we go he hems us in and keeps reaching out to us. That is exactly what he was doing with Manasseh. But notice verse 16. Manasseh was determined to silence the voice of God, and the only way he could silence that voice was to silence the prophets:

**Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another...**

Josephus, the Jewish historian, in writing about this event said that he "slew all the righteous men that were among the Hebrews, nor would he spare the prophets, for he every day slew some of them until Jerusalem was overflowed with blood." There is a very substantial and long-lasting Jewish and Christian tradition that it was during this time that Manasseh put Isaiah in a hollow oak tree and had him sawn in two. This may be what is behind the reference in Hebrews 11 to men of faith, some of whom were "sawn asunder." Manasseh slew the prophets. He wouldn't listen. He didn't want to hear the voice of God. So he

**...shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; besides his sin with which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the Lord.**

Do you know that both the author of 2 Kings and Jeremiah affirm that it was because of the sins of Manasseh that the nation of Judah was taken captive? It was only fifty years after Manasseh's death that the nation went into the

Babylonian captivity. How would you like to be known to posterity for that? That was Manasseh's reputation. He was responsible. Now look at verses 17 and 18:

**Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh and all that he did and his sin which he committed, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? And Manasseh slept with his fathers and was buried in the garden of his own house, in the garden of Uzza, and Amon his son became king in his place.**

I remember the first time I read that passage. I thought, "That's strange! Here is a man who thumbed his nose at God for sixty-seven years and died a ripe old age in his own bed in peace--the most wicked king in Judah's history, and God did nothing! Isn't that strange? He reigned longer than any other king in the history of Israel or Judah. Didn't you see, God? Weren't you aware of what was going on? Can a person really live that way and get away with it?"

Well, you see, the problem is that the entire story of Manasseh's life is not given to us in 2 Kings. The purpose of this book is to show us the precipitous decline of the nation. Many events in the lives of these kings were passed by for that reason. But the account is resumed and supplemented in 2 Chronicles. I would like you to turn with me to that record, to 2 Chronicles 33, where in the first nine verses we have a restatement of the first nine verses of 2 Kings 21, almost word for word. Then verses 9 through 11 say:

**Thus Manasseh misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel. And the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. [This is a briefer account of the ministry of the prophets to Manasseh and the people.] Therefore [emphasis mine] the Lord brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains, and took him to Babylon.**

This mighty king of Judah, with a ring in his nose and chains on his hands and feet, was dragged off to a Babylonian dungeon! At this time Babylon was a province of Assyria.

This is one of a number of Old Testament accounts for which we have excellent secular historical confirmation. A number of years ago assyriologists found an inscription which dated from the reign of Esarhaddon, the son of Sennacherib. Sennacherib was the king who invaded Judah during the reign of Hezekiah, Manasseh's father. He died in 680 B.C., interestingly enough the traditional date of Isaiah's death. Sennacherib never invaded Judah again because his last invasion cost him 168,000 men! But his son, Esarhaddon, was a young, ambitious, militaristic leader who was spoiling for a fight with Judah. You can see that God was preparing his instrument to chastise Manasseh, even though Manasseh seemed to be getting by scot-free. Esarhaddon came to the throne in 680 and some six years later he invaded Judah. The inscription describes this invasion. It says that, "twenty-two kings harkened to him," i.e., he called them, and they came! And, "of these was Manasseh, king of Judah." Esarhaddon took him off to Babylon, and for twelve long years he languished in that Babylonian dungeon with a ring in his nose and chains on his hands and feet. You see, that is the end of the process that God uses in our lives to bring us around. He will speak to us softly, and then with more insistence. Then he hems us on every side, with every witness to the truth that he can bring to bear. And then if we refuse to listen...he lets us have our way. He takes his hands off us, we reap what we have sown, and we become a slave to our own passions and desires. Thus we are brought to the end of ourselves. That is what happened to Manasseh.

But look closely at verse 12:

**And when he was in distress [the Hebrew says, "when he was hemmed in," i.e., when he was in the extremity and had no other place to turn], he entreated the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.**

Did you notice?--he entreated *his* God. He had lost his title but he hadn't lost his relationship. Jehovah was still his God. You see, God intends for us to reign in life, to live in victory over every habit and every circumstance of life. But when we rebel against him we lose our capacity to rule, and we become enslaved to our circumstances and to our own passions and habits. But we never lose our relationship to him, if we are truly his. So when Manasseh hit bottom he turned to the Lord his God and he humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He said, "Lord, I am sunk. I am beat. I've had it. I am to blame. I have sinned." Josephus says that he "esteemed himself to be the cause of it all." He saw that he had no one else to blame. The problem was not his circumstances, nor the culture in which he lived. He had had every advantage. The problem was his own rebellious heart. He came to the place where he was willing to submit that heart to the Lord. He humbled himself greatly before the Lord his God.

Verse 13:

**When he prayed to Him, He [God] was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was [the] God.**

Notice the second phrase in verse 13. It is translated, "He was moved by his entreaty." The Hebrew says, "He was interceded for him," which is awkward and untranslatable, and so it is translated this way. But the point is that someone was standing between God and Manasseh and was interceding for him. Thus God "was interceded." Now, who was that? Who was standing between the Lord and Manasseh?

We have the same picture in Zechariah 3, where Zechariah sees Joshua, the high priest, standing before the Lord of all the earth. And Satan is there to accuse him, because Joshua is clothed in filthy garments. Satan is saying in effect, "Look at Joshua. He is filthy! He has no right to be a priest." And the angel of Jehovah, who is the preincarnate Lord Jesus, intercedes for him, saying, "Remove the filthy garments from him... See, I have taken your iniquity away from you... Put a clean turban on his head..." That was the Lord Jesus interceding for Joshua. He is the one who interceded for Manasseh. And He intercedes for us.

God may have to chasten, because he chastens those whom he loves. He may have to discipline. He may bring hardship into our lives because of our rebellion. But He sees us as righteous in Jesus Christ. There is no sin that you can ever commit which will disqualify you in God's sight. You are forgiven! God never stops loving. He never stops accepting.

And so when Manasseh prayed, the Lord "heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom." He was restored to his place of authority. And that is what God does with us. We don't have to work our way back into his good graces. We don't have to prove that we are acceptable. We just keep on walking in a forgiven state. Paul says, "In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." And we can never, never, never look back on the past and say that anything we have ever done disqualifies us. We are clean. We are forgiven. We are righteous in God's eyes.

Then, verse 13 says, Manasseh knew that the Lord was, literally, *the* God. He realized that those idols had nothing for him--there was only one God and that is Jehovah. You see, God uses even our sin, the most despicable sin that we could ever commit, in a redemptive way, to show us that he is the Lord. For some reason Manasseh had to go through this process in order for him to get where God wanted him to go. It was painful, but yet it was productive. And he knew at the end of all these experiences that the Lord was the God.

What follows in verses 14 through 17 is an account of his activities in Jerusalem after his kingdom was restored to him:

**Now after this he built the outer wall of the city of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entrance of the Fish Gate; and he encircled the Ophel with it and made it very high.**

He rebuilt and strengthened the wall and the fortress that protected the city on the east and the southeast, overlooking the Kidron Valley. Evidently this was the place where the Assyrians had earlier breached the wall when he was taken into captivity. So he went back to that weak spot in the city's defenses and reinforced it.

**Then he put army commanders in all the fortified cities of Judah.**

He placed contingents of soldiers with commanders in each of the fortified cities in the outlying districts. He set his defenses out beyond the walls of Jerusalem so that he would not be surprised again by an attack right at the wall.

**He also removed the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, as well as all the altars which he had built on the mountain of the house of the Lord and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside the city.**

He purged the city of idolatry. He took every Asherah, every Baal, and threw them out of the city. He wanted nothing more to do with them.

**And he set up the altar of the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it; and he ordered Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel.**

He rebuilt the altar that he had destroyed, and he offered peace and thank offerings--the two offerings which have to do

with our relationship with God--peace because we have been reconciled to him, thanksgiving because it grows out of that reconciliation.

These steps which Manasseh took are the marks of true repentance. If one is truly repentant of the sins he has committed he will do these things. He will recognize that there are areas where he is weak, where he has fallen before, and he will rebuild those areas and strengthen them. Then he will determine to guard against surprise assaults in areas where he has been defeated before. He will move his defenses out beyond the point of weakness. He will "make no provision for the flesh." And he will deal with every vestige of idolatry in his life. Every false God will come under judgment and be cast out of the domain. And he will make Jesus Christ Lord.

Note the parallel with Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 7, in which he contrasts godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Worldly sorrow, he says, produces death. Worldly sorrow is the sorrow we experience because we have been caught in our sin or have reaped what we have sown, but then there is no desire to set things right. It produces death, defeat, despair, and depression. But there is a godly sorrow. There is a sorrow that will lead us to true repentance. Paul says that repentance is seen in a determination to clear ourselves. He says, "Behold what earnestness...this godly sorrow has produced in you, what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong!" That is, "You have determined to do what is right." That is a godly sorrow. Manasseh had that kind of sorrow. He dealt not only with his idolatrous spirit, he moved out into every area of life to deal with all causes of rebellion.

Verses 18 through 20 give us the final word on his life:

**Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh. Even his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the Lord God of Israel, behold, they are among the records of the kings of Israel. His prayer also and how God was entreated by him and all his sin, his unfaithfulness, and the sites on which he built high places and erected the Asherim and the carved images, before he humbled himself, behold, they are written in the records of the Hozai [prophets or the seers whose writings evidently are the basis for many of our prophetic books]. So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his own house. And Amon his son became king in his place.**

God gave him twenty more years of rule--ten years with his father, thirteen years of wickedness, twelve years in the dungeon, twenty years of righteous rule. He became one of the mightiest kings of Judah. So that is the story of Manasseh.

There are a number of things which speak to me from this biography. First, we all can identify with Manasseh because God could write "Manasseh" over each of our lives. We all have sinned as he sinned. Second, we can see something of the process that God uses to bring us to repentance. First he speaks to us quietly, then with greater and greater intensity. Finally, he disciplines us in order to bring us to the end of ourselves so that we will turn to him.

But most important, these passages speak of the completeness of the forgiveness of God.

Manasseh was notorious in Israel. He was an evil, wicked man. And yet God reestablished him on his throne. He was fully forgiven. He lived in power and authority throughout the rest of his years. Do you know what Manasseh's name means in Hebrew? "Forgotten." That is the name that God writes over your sordid past. Your sins are forgotten. Every time your past comes back to haunt you, and you say to God, "There, Lord, I have done it again," do you know what the Lord says to you? He says, "You've done what? I don't even remember!" He has forgotten. You can read his own words from Hebrews 10: "Your sins and your lawless deeds I will remember no more." He has forgotten the past. We walk on in life, forgiven.

We thank you for that complete forgiveness, Lord, and for the freedom to serve you because we know that we are at peace with you, in Christ's name, Amen.

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