

MANASSEH
A Wretch Like Me
II Chronicles 33: 1-20

I. The Good Kings of Judah.

A. The Good Kings.

Over a period of about 350 years (930-587 BC) the Southern Kingdom of Judah had 20 different kings, all descendants of David. Only eight of these kings were called "good." The rest were evil. The Scriptural account normally gives a short one-verse summary of each of the kings (whether good or bad) stating the basic moral character of the person's life. For example:

- *And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord His God. (II Chron. 14:2).*
- *Jehoram did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. (II Chron. 21:6).*
- *Ahaziah did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.... (II Chron. 22:3-4).*
- *And Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.... (II Chron. 24:2).*
- *Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.... (II Chron. 25:2).*
- *Etc.*

The stories of these kings introduces us to the historical reality that God's people had always been led by leaders who are a **strange mixture** of good and evil. Notice:

- 1) The summation of a person's life in the Scriptures is based not upon professional success, wealth or power but rather upon **moral character**.
- 2) Though all of these kings were a composite of good and evil, Scripture dares to give a summary statement of their life. Ultimately a person's life will be deemed either "good" or "evil." The Bible speaks in terms of **either/or**... not both/and.
- 3) A persons' moral character is ultimately measured not by some human standard of conduct but rather **"in the eyes of the Lord."**

B. The Moral Flaw.

During the past year we have studied eight good kings. For each of these men, Scripture describes numerous decisions and actions that were commendable in the sight of God. However, we have discovered that in the life of each good king there is one moral flaw that brought pain and hardship into both the king's life and the life of his family and nation. Surprisingly, rather than glossing over these faults, the Bible **highlights** them! Amazingly, no two kings had the same moral flaw. Each one had his own unique issues.

- **Solomon** (I Kings 11:1-8). Though blessed by God with wisdom, this king seriously compromised his witness by uncontrolled appetites for women, money and fame. The name of Solomon's character flaw: **lust**.
- **Asa** (II Chron. 16:1-14). Though Asa had a heart for God and spent most of his life in godly, faithful service, toward the end he put his trust in the king of Syria (II Chron. 16:7) and in medical doctors (II Chron. 16:12) rather than in the Lord. The name of Asa's character flaw: **unbelief**.
- **Jehoshaphat** (II Chron. 18:1-34; 20:35-37). On three occasions this good man allied himself with evil: through a political alliance with Ahab and Jezebel so that his son married their daughter, Athaliah (II Chron. 18:1), through a military alliance with Ahab (II Chron. 18:2-3), and through an economic trade alliance with Israel (II Chron. 20:35-37). All three alliances

brought great suffering on Jehoshaphat and the nation of Judah. The name of Jehoshaphat's character flaw: **moral compromise**.

- **Joash** (II Chron. 24:17-27). Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoida the priest (II Chron. 24:2). But when this godly counselor died, Joash suddenly went profoundly astray. He was a thermometer when God called him to be a thermostat. The name of Joash's character flaw: **fickle faith**.
- **Amaziah** (II Chron. 25:14-16). The key to understanding this good king's moral flaw is found in II Chron. 25:2. *Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, yet not with a whole heart.* His double-minded condition helps us better understand his decision late in life to worship idols. The name of Amaziah's character flaw: **a divided heart**.
- **Uzziah** (II Chron. 26:16-23). When God blesses someone's life, it should make him humble. Not so with Uzziah: *when he was strong, he grew proud* (II Chron. 26:16). In his pride, he assumed a role for himself that God never intended: acting as a priest in the Temple. The consequences (leprosy) were severe. The name of Uzziah's character flaw: **pride**.
- **Hezekiah** (II Chron. 32:24-33; II Kings 20:1-21). In the prime of his life, at the age of 39, after serving God faithfully for many years, Hezekiah was stricken with a serious illness. Isaiah the prophet came to him and said: *Thus says the Lord, "Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover."* (II Kings 20:1). Rather than submitting to the prophetic word, Hezekiah turned his face to the wall... and wept bitterly (II Kings 20:2-3). The name of Hezekiah's character flaw: **bitterness**.
- **Josiah** (II Chron. 35:20-27). The outcome of a baseball game is determined only in the 9th inning. Similarly, the outcome a man's life is seen in his final acts. Although Josiah had a sterling track record for most of his life, he did not finish strong. Though God tried to warn him through a message delivered by Pharaoh Neco (!) (II Chron. 35: 21-22), he refused to listen. He rejected God's message because he did not like the messenger. The name of Josiah's character flaw: **spiritual deafness**.

TABLE TALK

1. All eight of these "good" kings of Judah had a serious moral flaw. All eight finished badly. How do you respond to this? Why are these stories in the Bible? What is God trying to say?
2. Look again at the specific moral flaws in the lives of the kings: lust, unbelief, moral compromise, fickle faith, a divided heart, pride, bitterness, spiritual deafness. Which of these moral flaws do you most identify with? Why? Can one moral flaw ruin an otherwise good life?

II. Good King Manasseh?

A. A Troubling Contrast.

At first glance, King Manasseh seems to be just another "bad" king in Judah. His story is inserted in the broader text as another example of evil leadership in the Southern Kingdom. But on closer look, his life is unique in two respects:

1) The worst of the worst.

Both the **length** of his reign (55 years!) and **depth** of his sin give him the title for the vilest king in Judah's history. In fact, Manasseh led Judah "to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel" (II Chron. 33:9). It was Manasseh's evil reign that finally caused God to bring judgment and exile on the nation of Judah. (See Jer. 15:4).

Surely this (destruction, judgment, exile) came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon. (II Kings 24:3-4).

2) His conversion.

However, the most startling characteristic of Manasseh's life is his conversion! At the end of his life (the 9th inning) he humbled himself, repented, and found favor with God. We could say that he thus joined the list of the "good" kings of Judah. What a dramatic contrast this makes with the other "good" kings of Judah. They all started out well but ended **tragically**. Manasseh did just the opposite. He started out badly and ended up being **blessed by God!**

B. A Wretch Like Me.

The life of King Manasseh is told in II Chronicles 33:1-20.¹ The first part the story relates the depth and extent of Manasseh's perversity.

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem.² And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.³ For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Asherahs, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them.⁴ And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever."⁵ And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD.⁶ And he burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.⁷ And the carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever,⁸ and I will no more remove the foot of Israel from the land that I appointed for your fathers, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses."⁹ Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel. (II Chron. 33:1-9)

Rather than glossing over Manasseh's sins, the Scriptures highlight them.

1) **Idolatry** (vv. 3-5, 7).

King Hezekiah had labored for years to eradicate idolatry from Jerusalem and Judah but his evil son **undid** all that he had accomplished. The text mentions by name the idols Manasseh worshipped.

- Baal. The Canaanite fertility god.

¹ Manasseh's life is also recounted in II Kings 21:1-18, but our study will focus primarily upon the account in Chronicles.

- Asherah. This Canaanite goddess was the female companion for Baal. Sometimes the word refers to the goddess herself and sometimes to the images (poles of stone or wood) that were erected to represent her.
- The host of heaven (sun, moon, planets, stars).

The seriousness of Manasseh's idolatry is seen in the fact that he put some of these idols in the **Temple** of Jerusalem! Is it possible that he removed the Ark of the Covenant from the Most Holy Place and replaced it with an idol?

2) **The Occult** (v. 6).

As the Mosaic law condemned idolatry, so it condemned all forms of occult practices (sorcery, divination, witchcraft, consulting the dead, black magic, spiritism, fortunetelling, etc.). And yet Manasseh promoted all of these practices in Judah.

3) **Child Sacrifice** (v. 6).

Perhaps nothing illustrates the depth of Manasseh's sin more than his practice of child sacrifice. The Old Testament seems to place this sin in a category all by itself. When a culture destroys its children for personal gain, what is left of civilization to save? ²

4) **Violence** (II Kings 21:16).

Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the another... (II Kings 21:16).

The Bible doesn't elaborate on Manasseh's cruelty but highlights the fact that those killed during his reign were "innocent." Some think that Manasseh had Isaiah the prophet put to death (sawn in two).

5) Refusal **to Listen**.

It wasn't that Manasseh and Judah had no options. God gave them one opportunity after another to change their behavior and avert the coming judgment, but they willfully and continually chose not to listen. "The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention." (v. 10). It is one thing when sin is based in ignorance and weakness. It is another thing when sin is **willful, habitual**, violation of God's **known** law.

C. Amazing Grace.

Buckle your seat belts! The next part of Manasseh's story is truly one of the most amazing stories of grace in the entire Bible.

¹¹ Therefore the LORD brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks (put a hook in his nose, NIV) and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. ¹² And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and **humbled himself greatly** before the God of his fathers. ¹³ He prayed to him, and **God was moved** by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that **the LORD was God** (II Chron. 33:11-13).

² Note the location where child sacrifice took place: the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (Ge-Hinnom, in Hebrew). This became the origin of the Greek word *gehenna* which in English is usually translated "hell" (a place of burning fire, torture, punishment).

Just as Saul was perhaps the most unlikely candidate for conversion in the New Testament, so Manasseh was in the Old Testament. Who could have imagined that this wicked king would humble himself and pray and seek God's face? And even more astounding, who could have imagined that God would have accepted a scoundrel like this? The prodigal son had come home and the Father had welcomed him! **Elder brothers** everywhere still struggle to accept this!

D. Fruits of Repentance.

Is it possible that Manasseh turned to God only because of his suffering and tragic circumstances? Maybe this was only the act of a drowning man reaching for any life preserver he could find? Should we put Manasseh's conversion in the same category as those who turn to God when they have cancer, experience divorce, lose their jobs? Was this a **foxhole conversion**?

We could perhaps take such a posture *except* for what happened next. God enabled Manasseh to live long enough to give evidence to everyone that his conversion was indeed real and authentic.

¹⁴ Afterward he built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon, in the valley, and for the entrance into the Fish Gate, and carried it around Ophel, and raised it to a very great height. He also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah. ¹⁵ And he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. ¹⁶ He also restored the altar of the LORD and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and he commanded Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁷ Nevertheless, the people still sacrificed at the high places, but only to the LORD their God.

¹⁸ Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, and his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, behold, they are in the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. ¹⁹ And his prayer, and how God was moved by his entreaty, and all his sin and his faithlessness, and the sites on which he built high places and set up the Asherim and the images, before he humbled himself, behold, they are written in the Chronicles of the Seers. ²⁰ So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his house, and Amon his son reigned in his place. (II Chron. 33:1-20).

The authenticity of his conversion is evidenced in the fact that:

- 1) He sought to make **restitution** for the evil he had done. He removed the idols (that he had erected) from Judah and Jerusalem (v. 15).
- 2) He restored the altar of the Lord and re-established **true worship** in the Temple (v. 16).
- 3) He sought **to influence** those he had once misled, in the right path (v. 16). He commanded Judah to serve the Lord.
- 4) The Scriptures twice assert that God was "**moved**" by Manasseh's repentance and that he heard his prayer (vv. 13, 19).

E. Yet Even Forgiven Sin Has Consequences.

Though God forgave Manasseh for his sins and restored him to favor, the tragic consequences of his reign of terror could not be erased. Even though sin may be forgiven, the consequences often remain.

- The people continued to practice idolatry (v. 17).
- His evil influence continued to cast a dark shadow on future generations. His son, Amon, imitated the evil ways of his father (II Chron. 33:22).
- Judgment and destruction still came on Jerusalem (II Kings 24:3-4; Jer. 15:4).

III. Application Today.

So, what does the lesson of Manasseh's life have to teach us, here, today?

A. No sin is deeper than God's grace.

If ever there was a lost soul beyond the reach of grace, wicked Manasseh would be the one. His rebellion against God was flagrant, willful, continual, and in full knowledge of what he was doing. And yet, grace finally found him. Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more! (Romans 5:20). There is no pit of sin so deep that the grace cannot go deeper still! The main character in this story is not Manasseh... but **God!** Apparently, he is willing to let anyone (!) into his Kingdom, provided they confess their sin and turn from their wicked ways. The converted slave trader, John Newton, knew personally how the extent of grace was greater than the extent of sin.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

"Only when grace is recognized to be incomprehensible is it grace." Karl Barth.

B. The wages of sin.

Lest anyone should draw the conclusion that because God is so ready to forgive our sins, therefore, our sins are of little consequence, beware! Even forgiven sin can sometimes carry very heavy consequences! Though God forgave Manasseh, his legacy of wickedness continued to haunt the people of Judah for centuries to come.

C. God's megaphone.

Though God had tried to speak to Manasseh through the prophets, the Scriptures, and the Temple, nothing seemed to get through. So finally God "spoke" to him through suffering. Somehow, this "message" got his attention and got through.

The Lord spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention. Therefore the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his father. (II Chron. 33: 10-12).

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis gives a memorable description of how suffering is often the method most effectively used by God to get our attention so that we are able to hear what he wants to tell us. "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." (p. 74).

But it doesn't turn out this way for everyone. Sometimes suffering has the opposite effect. Rather than drawing people to God, sometimes pain pushes them away! We see a troubling illustration in the life of wicked king Ahaz. "In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the Lord..." (II Chron. 28:22).

D. The Key that Unlocks the Door.

So what does one need to do to become a candidate for God's amazing, restoring, redeeming grace??? The verse that shows us the answer to this question is II Chronicles 7:14.

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chron. 7:14).

Here we see four essentials that are necessary to make one a candidate for grace (getting God's attention, forgiveness of sin, healing our land). Interestingly, these are precisely the four things that wicked king Manasseh did when he experienced God's amazing grace.

- 1) **Humble yourself** (II Chron. 33:12, 23).
- 2) **Pray** (II Chron. 33:12-13, 18-19).
- 3) Seek **God's face** (no specific reference but the reality is present).
- 4) **Turn** from your wicked ways (II Chron. 33:15-16).

Table Talk

1. How do you respond to Manasseh's conversion? Do you find this story comforting? Or does it disturb you? Why?
2. If you were God, would you have forgiven Manasseh? What does your answer reveal to you about your concept of God?
3. Tell of a personal experience you may have had when you discovered that though sin may be forgiven... unfortunate consequences yet remain.
4. C. S. Lewis describes pain as God's megaphone. What does he mean? How does Manasseh illustrate this truth? Describe a time in your own life when pain and suffering enabled you to hear more clearly what God was trying to say to you.
5. Pray together.

*How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure*

*How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the chosen One.
Bring many sons to glory*

*Behold the Man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice.
Call out among the scoffers*

*It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished*

*I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection*

*Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom.*