

2 Chronicles 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Chronicles chapter 33 Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. 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.

For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Ashtaroath, and worshipped all the hosts of heaven, and served them.

And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, In Jerusalem shall my name be for ever. And he built altars for all the hosts of heaven, in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

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.

And the carved image of the idol that he made he set in the house of God, of which God had 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 for ever.

[1 : 07] 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.

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. 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 favour of the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.

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. 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 up to a very great height.

He also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah. 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.

[2 : 23] And he threw them outside of the city. 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.

Nevertheless the people still sacrificed at the high places, but only to the Lord their God. 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.

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.

So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his house, and Ammon his son reigned in his place. Ammon was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem.

And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done. Ammon sacrificed to all the images that Manasseh his father had made, and served them. And he did not humble himself before the Lord, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself.

[3 : 36] But this Ammon incurred guilt more and more, and his servants conspired against him, and put him to death in his house. But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against King Ammon.

And the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his place. In 2 Chronicles chapter 33, Judah is gradually descending to the grave of exile, a fate in which they would join their northern sister Israel.

Manasseh, the subject of much of the chapter, was both the most wicked of Judah's kings, and also someone who remarkably repented later in his life. Manasseh's reign likely began around 696 BC, 10 years prior to Hezekiah's death, and ended around 642 BC.

After a 10-year co-regency with his father Hezekiah, he came to sole regency at around the age of 22. Manasseh largely reverses the actions of his father. He rebuilds the high places that his father destroyed.

He restores the altars to Baal, and the shrines to Asherah. He once more defiles the temple, as Ahaz had done. On top of all of this, he engages in a litany of perverse and pagan practices.

[4 : 43] He uses fortune-telling, omens, sorcery, mediums, and necromancers. And on top of all of these abominations, he sacrifices his sons as an offering in the valley of the son of Hinnom.

Yet in all of these things, he has not reached the height of his perversity. Worst of all, he places a carved image in the temple itself. He reduces the Lord to yet another in the pagan pantheon of the region, sharing space with idols and false gods within his very own house.

The Lord's temple is defiled, transformed into an idolatrous shrine. Abominations are placed in his very presence. To heighten his hearer's sense of their severity, the chronicler juxtaposes his account of Manasseh's sins with reminders of the word of the Lord.

For instance, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever, 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.

The hearer of the text is to recall the covenant, to recognise just how severe Manasseh's idolatries actually are. Manasseh's sins exceed even those of the Canaanite nations that the Lord drove out of the land before Israel came to it.

[6 : 02] As the king of a nation that had already been prophetically condemned to exile by the word of Isaiah under the reign of his father, Manasseh seems to be doing all that he can to invite the execution of the sentence.

And tis not that they are left without warning. The Lord sends messengers to Manasseh and to the people, yet they pay no attention. Stubbornly persisting in their rebellion, the Lord finally brings the judgement upon them.

The king of Assyria comes up against Manasseh, captures him, and brings him in chains to Babylon. The timing of the capture and the exile of Manasseh is much debated by biblical scholars.

Some date it to late in the reign of Manasseh, around 648 BC. They speculate that Manasseh may have supported the brother of Ashurbanipal in his rebellion against him. And when Ashurbanipal put down the rebellion, he presumably captured Manasseh and brought him into exile.

Perhaps one of the greater challenges that this dating poses is accounting for all the construction work that is described after this that must be fitted in the short window of time after his release.

[7 : 03] Others have dated it to 677 BC or to 675 to 673 BC, both periods during which there were rebellions in the region, in which Manasseh may have gotten involved.

One of the challenges for these readings is accounting for Babylon as the site of exile. The city of Babylon did not fall to the Assyrians until 648 BC, and it is not easy to see why Babylon would be the site of Manasseh's humiliation.

One possibility is that Babylon is a more general reference to Mesopotamia, which is being spoken of in this way to draw parallels to events later on in the story. In chapter 36 of 2 Chronicles, Nebuchadnezzar comes up against Jerusalem and binds Jehoiakim in chains to take him to Babylon.

Manasseh then would anticipate the fate of his descendant and of the nation with him. There is a surprising twist to Manasseh's story. While in Babylon, he humbles himself and turns to the Lord and entreats the Lord's favour.

The Lord graciously hears him and brings him back into Jerusalem to his kingdom. Through this, Manasseh comes to know that the Lord is God. Upon his return to Jerusalem, he engages in a series of construction efforts.

[8 : 12] He builds an outer wall for the city and raises the height of the wall. He strengthens the forces in the fortified cities of Judah. And he turns to the ways of his father Hezekiah. He purges the land of all his former idolatries.

He takes away the foreign gods. He takes away the idol from the house of the Lord. And he removes the altars that he had placed in the mountain of the house of the Lord. He restores the true altar and he offers sacrifices upon it.

While he does not establish true centralised worship as he ought to do, the people are worshipping the Lord in the high places and not foreign gods. It is, at the very least, a step in the right direction.

Recognising the ways in which Manasseh anticipates the exile of Jehoiakim, we might be able to see some ways in which his experience and his repentance provide a lesson for the nation as a whole.

As even the most wicked king turns to the Lord in the situation of exile, he can be restored to the land. The walls can be rebuilt. The temple can be re-established as a site of true worship.

[9 : 12] This is a remarkable message of hope, of the extent of the Lord's forgiveness, if Judah is only prepared to listen to it. Exile might be imminent, but it need not be the end of their story.

Manasseh is quite anomalous in the story of Judah. When we think of the Davidic kings, so many of them start out well and then fall away at some point later on in their lives or fail in some regard.

In the case of Manasseh, the movement is in the other direction. He starts off as one of the most wicked kings of all and then turns to the Lord and after repenting, the kingdom seems to enjoy some prosperity and security under his reign.

The movement doesn't always have to be downhill. There can be a turning back to the Lord. Even for a king that has squandered so many blessings and done so much wickedness, there is still a way back.

Sadly, Manasseh is succeeded by Ammon his son, who reverses the reforms of his father Manasseh and walks in the ways of the early Manasseh, while failing to repent as Manasseh had done later on in his reign.

[10:11] Once again, the nation suffers political upheaval as a conspiracy is formed against him. He is put to death in his house and Josiah his son is made king in his place. A question to consider.

Ammon is described as following the example of Manasseh his father in doing evil in the sight of the Lord in the way that he sacrificed to images as his father had done. Manasseh by this point had repented and yet the impact of the initial bad course that he had set continued to be felt.

How can we think about the relationship between the consequences of people's sins and the guilt of them, between God's forgiveness of our sins and God's sparing us various other ramifications of them?