

'THE KING WHO FOUND THE BOOK'
2 KINGS 22:1-23:30

[St Mark's Northbridge, Sunday, June 6, 2021]

On Monday just gone I caught up with a Christian brother with whom I meet monthly to read the Bible and pray. In recent months we've been reading through the Old Testament prophecy of Amos. And on Monday we came to chapter 8. And towards the end of Amos 8 we read these very sobering words:

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land- not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.”¹

What a terrible prospect that was. That one day God would be so angry with his people that he would shut his own mouth, that we would deprive his people of his voice, that there would be a famine of his words. And that prophetic threat in Amos 8 is built on the assumption that God's word is one of the greatest gifts he's ever given. Amos 8 assumes that there's perhaps nothing more precious in the world than to have God reveal himself to you, and to tell you how he longs for you to live.

And, of course, the section of 2 Kings which we've just read this morning/evening is built on the same assumption. But here we see the opposite. Not the terrible destitution that comes when God's word is hidden, but the wonderful goodness that flows when God's word is found. This is the story of Judah's next king- the king who found the book. These are the years of Josiah.

And what I want to do today is quickly summarise what we've read in these chapters- that's point 1 on your outlines. And then I want to offer three reflections on what these chapters mean for us- points 2-4. But let's start by reminding ourselves about the kind of king Josiah was.

1. Josiah's Years.

- the boy king

And we discover to begin with that he was a boy king. The start of chapter 22 tells us that he was only 8 years old when he began to reign. When I was eight I was learning how to throw a cricket ball, and how to spell three syllable words, and experimenting with burning

¹ Amos 8:11-12

things using the sun and a magnifying glass. But here was 8 year old Josiah taking the nation's throne.

- the steadfast king

But there's no hint here that his youth led to foolishness. Rather, his entire 31 years as king was marked by wisdom, by what we might call steadfastness. Listen to the summary in 22:2.

[Read 22:2]

Now this isn't a statement about his politics. We're not being told that he was centrist rather than left or right. Instead, we're being told that he was resolutely committed to listening to God and doing what was right in God's eyes. In this sense, he was a steadfast king.

And that's why we're told that even before the re-discovery of the book of the law, Josiah was demonstrating a mature concern for the things of God. For example, he was carefully ensuring that the LORD's temple was diligently maintained². From the beginning of his reign until the end, Josiah was faithful to his God.

- the convicted king

But of course, this faithfulness was tested and proven especially in the eighteenth year of his reign. That was the year when the book of the law was rediscovered in the temple. No doubt throughout the 55 year reign of his grandfather Manasseh, the book of the law had been tucked away in a corner of the temple somewhere collecting dust. And his father King Amon certainly hadn't made any effort to dig it out. But in God's providence, in Josiah's eighteenth year, Hilkiah the high priest found it. He gave it to Shaphan the king's secretary who read it, and immediately realised that the king should read it too. And with the most delightfully understated description imaginable, verse 10 tells us about this momentous moment.

[Read 22:10]

The priest has given me a book! What a way to say it. But of course this wasn't just any old book. This was God's book. When people heard its words they heard the voice of God. And when people hear God speak, anything can happen!

² See 22:3-7. But it's also possible that some of what we read in 23:6-20 pre-dates the re-discovery of the law which occurred in the 18th year of his reign (22:3, and 23:23). This would cohere with the alternate chronology presented in 2 Chronicles 34-35. On these chronological issues, see Dale Ralph Davis' *2 Kings*, p.319 (and for a different, and less persuasive view, Donald Wiseman's *1 and 2 Kings*, p.294).

Certainly when Josiah hears it, his entire life changes in an instant. He's cut to the heart. He becomes the king convicted. He hears God's promises. He hears what God had said about how his people must live in covenant with him. And he hears of the judgement which God had said would come upon his people if they ignored him. And all of a sudden, Josiah is flooded with awe, and grief, and uncertainty, and fear.

And so messengers are sent to the prophetess Huldah to find out through her how God sees the nation at this point. And she confirms Josiah's fears. God is greatly grieved that his people have ignored him for so long. And as a result of their idolatry, his anger has been aroused. And all the disaster that God had said would befall the disloyal and disobedient, will befall them. It's a dark message that comes back from Huldah to the king that day. And the only ray of light is the promise that because Josiah himself responded to God's word with humility, the day of disaster will not come until after his death. Like Hezekiah before him³, his own lifetime would be marked by God's merciful delay. But nevertheless, the day of wrath would certainly come.

- the destructive king

But even though Josiah did not receive the answer he may've hoped for, he continues in his devotion to God resolutely. The start of chapter 23 tells us how he gathered all the people of Judah together at the temple. And then he personally read the book of the law to them all. And having read God's words, he then led the people in re-dedicating themselves to God. As verse 3 says, he 'renewed the covenant'.

And then from verse 4 of chapter 23 onwards, we hear how Josiah went on a righteous rampage. And this is why I also call him the destructive king. Because Josiah doesn't just say all the right things in verses 1-3. He then demonstrates that he's a man of action as well. And his action is a methodical and thorough expression of national repentance. One writer calls it Josiah's 'de-Manassefication program'⁴. Everything that was wrong in Judah under Manasseh's reign had to be set right. Everything that was defiled needed to be purified. And that's what Josiah set out to do.

He burned idols. He removed and even killed idolatrous priests. He took idolatrous artefacts and ground them to dust. He tore down the shrines of prostitutes set up in the temple. He broke down the high places which even many so called "good kings" had tolerated. He desecrated the place where people had been sacrificing their children. He brought to an end the long corrupting influence of Jeroboam son of Nebat⁵. He respectfully cared for the graves of faithful prophets who'd brought the word of the Lord to stubborn

³ See 20:19.

⁴ Davis- p.320.

⁵ See verse 15 especially.

Israelite hearts⁶. And he intentionally defiled places of idolatrous worship so they couldn't be sacred, even if they were rebuilt.

He did all this with decisiveness, with no hint of compromise, and with holy violence. And to our modern ears some of this may sound a little "extreme". But we must remember that Josiah was not just some social justice warrior who'd become a law unto himself. No, he was acting on God's behalf, fuelled by jealousy for God's honour, consumed by zeal for God's house⁷.

- the worshipful king

And that's underlined for us by what happens next. 23:21.

[Read 23:21-23]

Under Josiah's leadership, the people celebrated the Passover for the first time in hundreds of years. They worshipped the LORD as he'd asked to be worshipped. They remembered the LORD's saving grace.

And in this moment, we see Josiah's heart. We see that his destructive zeal was working towards this end. He was cleansing Judah that Judah might be purified for worship. And so, he worshipped. And all the people with him.

These were Josiah's years. And they were some of the best years God's Old Testament people ever had. For good reason, the reign of Josiah is seen as a high water mark in the history of Israel.

But what are we meant to take from these chapters? How is the reign of King Josiah significant for us? I want to turn now to reflect with you on three things.

2. Reflection # 1: The Power of the Book.

And the first thing for us to think about here is the power of the book. Because in many ways that's the stand-out theme of these chapters. Yes- Josiah was a great king. But was there something behind him that made his reign great? Yes. And on this occasion it wasn't a great woman. It was a powerful book. And much more than a book, of course. It was the word of God. And what we see in Josiah's life is that the word of God has the power to stir hearts and to provoke action.

- stirring hearts

⁶ Verses 17-18.

⁷ Cf. Psalm 69:9.

In particular, it stirred Josiah's heart. The prophetess Huldah reflects on this in 22:19.

[Read 22:19]

Josiah heard God's word, and even though it wasn't a message he would've wanted to hear, he listened and he accepted what God said. He was humble.

I read a story recently about Abraham Lincoln and a moment in his presidency when he gave a direction to the Secretary of War- a man named Edwin Stanton. Apparently when Stanton received the President's written order, an order he thought was ill advised, he asked the messenger if Lincoln himself had given the order. When he was told he had, Stanton replied: 'Then he is a damned fool.' This was subsequently reported back to the President who took a moment to reflect and then said: 'If Stanton said I was a damned fool then I must be one.' And he arranged a meeting with Stanton to reconsider the order⁸. That's humility, even in a great leader.

And stories like that stick with us because, sadly, they're rare. It's not often we hear about a great leader submitting so humbly to a word of rebuke or warning. But that's what Josiah did here. And yet, we're told about it not so we'll admire Josiah, but so we'll see the power of the word which produced this humility, the power of the word to stir hearts.

- provoking action

But, of course, the word of God in these chapters doesn't just produce a humble heart, and sincere weeping, and torn robes. It also provokes action. It's the word of God that thrusts Josiah out onto the highways of Judah seeking every expression of idolatry and disobedience in order to destroy them. It's the word of God that leads Josiah to cleanse the land that he and the people might worship God as he deserves.

And so we're reminded here that this was not just a book for a man, but a book for a nation. The dusty book that had sat for decades in a corner of the temple, was a book that didn't just have the power to stir one man's heart and provoke him to action. It was a book that had the power to change the course and culture of a whole country.

And the same is true today. Like the book Josiah rediscovered, our Scriptures are more than just a book. They are the word of God to us. And the word of God today is not just for me and for you, but for our nation. It has things to say to Australia like it did to ancient Judah. It calls us to repentance, not just as individuals, but as a country. It has things to say about the way we've treated indigenous people, and the way we pursue reconciliation with them today. It has things to say about how we treat the poor and vulnerable amongst us. It has things to say about how we treat the stateless and desperate people who come to our

⁸ Cited by Davis- p.317.

shores seeking refuge. It has things to say about how we treat the land itself- the environment in which we live. It has things to say about how we treat the people of other nations who don't have the same wealth we do. Above all it has things to say about how we treat God.

And so we ought to pray that God would grant to the people of our nation the same humility before God's word that the people of Judah had in the days of Josiah. And perhaps we ought to pray that God would spare Australia from ever experiencing a famine of his word here. And certainly we should pray that God would give to us here today, his people, a great appetite for the book- the kind of appetite that comes from believing it really is the powerful word of God.

3. Reflection # 2: The Uniqueness of the King.

But the second thing that we must consider when thinking about these chapters is the uniqueness of the king. And if you've read the earlier chapters of this book, you can't help but read 2 Kings 22 and 23 and notice how unlike his predecessors Josiah is. But just in case you missed it, this is what the author says in 23:25.

[Read 23:25]

- none like him before

And clearly the first part of that claim is entirely uncontroversial. Before Josiah, there really were none like him. And that's why as we read 2 Kings Josiah's arrival on the scene brings us great joy. And that's also why as readers we find ourselves being stirred to follow his good example. And he really ought to have this effect on us. Don't you want to tremble at God's word as Josiah did⁹? Don't you want to be steadfast like he was- never turning to the right or the left but resolutely obeying God in every moment? Don't you want to see revival in our day as he did in his, and doesn't Josiah make you want to pray for that? Don't you want to turn to the Lord every hour of every day, like Josiah did, with all your heart, and soul, and strength?

No doubt God shows us the uniqueness of Josiah to paint a picture for us of what a person is like when they're wholly surrendered to God. And what a nation is like when they're led by such a man into similar devotion. He really was a unique king when compared with all the kings who went before.

- none like him since?

⁹ See Isaiah 66:2

But from our perspective on 2 Kings, I want to suggest that the second part of the author's claim in 23:25 requires a bit more thought. And I refer here to the claim that there have been none like him since.

Now, of course, at the time of writing, I'm sure what the author of 2 Kings claims here was entirely true. But is it still true today? I wonder what you think? Has there been a king like Josiah since his days? Has there been anyone his equal or even his superior?

Well, we know of at least one, do we not? We know of a king who came about 1000 years after Josiah. He too was steadfast in devotion to God. He too was deeply convicted by God's word. And he too not only spoke righteous words, but lived righteously. He too was consumed with zeal for God's house¹⁰, even to the point of violence. We remember the day he entered the temple and drove the idolatrous out with a whip, scattering coins, turning over tables. He too sought to cleanse his people in order that they might be purified for proper worship. But in his case, that cleansing would come not by the destruction he wreaked, but by the destruction that was wreaked upon him- upon his body, the temple destroyed but raised again in three days.

And so, we read these chapters thanking God for the unique way Josiah exercised his kingship in his time, and yet thanking God all the more that Josiah was not the last righteous king of Israel, but that God gave to his people, even to us, a king whose sandals Josiah would not even be worthy to untie.

4. Reflection # 3: The Holiness of God.

And then thirdly, and finally today/tonight, a reflection on the holiness of God. Because, as we've consistently seen through 2 Kings, this is ultimately a book about God- and not just ancient Israel's God, but ours. So what we see of God here is deeply relevant to us.

- promise-keeper

And one of the things about God that slaps us in the face with this passage is that he's a promise-keeper. And here I want to pick up on a detail in the text that you might miss if you weren't paying careful attention. I want to direct your eyes again to 23:16.

[Read 23:16]

This is part of Josiah's righteous rampage, his purification program. This altar he defiles was at a high place set up by Jeroboam son of Nebat hundreds of years before. And it had been in Israel since that time, providing a way for the people to worship on their own terms rather than on God's. And Josiah defiles it by sprinkling the ashes of burnt human bones on

¹⁰ Psalm 69:9, quoted in John 2:17

the altar, thus removing any possibility that it could ever be used for worship again. But 2 Kings 23 tells us that he did this in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by the man of God who foretold these things. Which man of God is that?

Well, that's the man of God we read about in 1 Kings 13- back in the time of Jeroboam son of Nebat. Let me read to you from 1 Kings 13:1-2.

[Read 1 Kings 13:1-2]

300 years earlier, when this altar was first built, as part of the disgraceful apostasy of Jeroboam, an unnamed prophet uttered an outrageously specific prediction- that one day a King called Josiah would desecrate this altar. And so, when we come to 2 Kings 23, the author wants to remind us that what's happening here is exactly what God had said would happen. He wants us to see that every word that comes out of the mouth of God can be trusted. Every promise will be fulfilled.

- judge

Even his promises of judgement. As that promise back in 1 Kings 13 was. And as other promises God made also were. And perhaps more than anything else, this is a point these chapters shine the light on. And so that's where we'll finish this morning/evening.

I trust it's obvious to you how these chapters focus our attention on God as the judge. In chapter 22 after Josiah rediscovers the book of the law and sends a delegation to the prophetess, she confirms that what the book of the law said would be fulfilled. God's anger is aroused when his people ignore him and they will be punished.

And what follows is the extended, thorough, and decisive purification of all Israel by the righteous Josiah. And right through most of chapter 23 the author tells us in detail about how Josiah did this, culminating in the joyful Passover celebration which was the crowning glory of this national revival moment. And then- verse 26.

[Read 23:26-27]

And that's where the story of Josiah's life ends. With the fierce anger of God, and with the certainty that God will reject and exile the people of Judah. It's devastating! And the bitterness of this final word rests heavily on us coming, as it does, straight after the extended description of Judah's finest hour¹¹. And we can find ourselves feeling surprised by this, wondering why Josiah's godly reign wasn't rewarded with the removal of God's judgement, feeling perhaps like this is not how Josiah's story should end. But, when we do feel like that, it's because we've fallen into the trap of believing more in karma than in grace.

¹¹ I'm grateful for some of the language here to Dale Ralph Davis- p.322.

The story of Josiah ends as it does because God is holy. He keeps his promises. And the righteous reign of one godly king did not change the fact that his people had largely ignored him for hundreds of years, and God had assured them that turning away from him to idols would arouse his anger. And God doesn't give up being holy and faithful and wrathful because of a few good years, and some improved performance. God's favour is not bought or earnt by human merit.

We know that don't we. Even if sometimes the world tempts us to think differently. Even if at times we kid ourselves into thinking that there are people righteous enough to earn God's favour- which of course there aren't, not even Josiah! God's favour is not bought or earnt by human merit. And verses 26 and 27 of 2 Kings 23 are here to remind us of that – emphatically. The revival in the time of Josiah was wonderful. But it could not save people from the holy wrath of God.

But we know something else as well, don't we. There is a way that God's favour comes to people, and it's the same way it came to Josiah and the people in his days. By grace. By the kindness of God in revealing himself to people. And by the mercy of God that chooses not to weigh our merits, but to pardon our offences. Human goodness will never turn the tide of God's judgement. Only Jesus can do that- by absorbing God's holy anger in his death, and then rising in victory to offer God's life to the world. Which he did.

The words of the apostle Paul in Titus 3 capture this well, and I end today/tonight with these:

'But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.'¹²

¹² Titus 3:4-7