

Sundown at Noon

II Kings 23; II Chronicles 35

Introduction

You may remember the 1996 TWA flight 800 that exploded in mid-air just seventeen minutes after taking off from Kennedy Airport. It plummeted into the ocean off of Long Island and sent this country into shock. The unanswered questions surrounding that plane crash sent jitters through our national nervous system.

One of the passengers on that plane was a twenty year old believer named Matthew Alexander. Matthew was heading to France for a short term missions project. Majoring in French at Wake Forest University, Matthew was planning to use his language skills through a ministry internship that focused on reaching French teenagers with the gospel. The last phone call he made was to his eighty-one year old grandmother, Helen Alexander, with whom he had kept a close relationship. His ended the conversation in the way he always did, with the words, “Grandma, pray for me.”

There is no doubt that the “homegoing” of a young life, especially one whose life promises so much for the gospel of Jesus Christ, is often confusing and, in our perspective, tragic. One author, who wrote one hundred fifty years ago, referred to the death of a committed Christian at the early stages of great potential as, “The sun going down at noon.”

Three lessons from noontime darkness

Let me give three lessons from noontime darkness:

- God’s plans, ordained in heaven, are mysterious!
- Human life, lived on earth, passes so quickly!

- The Christian, in the center of God’s plans, can experience tragedy!

Review of the life of King Josiah

In our last few discussions, our study has focused on the life of a godly king named Josiah. He was a young man with great potential, yet the sun will go down at noon in his life.

Through the narratives in Kings and Chronicles, we watched as Josiah:

- ascended the throne as an eight-year-old, displaying that there was something special about him in being remarkably different from his ungodly father;
- displayed a deep conviction for things of the Lord as a sixteen-year-old, reminding us that teenagers, if they will surrender their lives to God, can do mighty things for God’s cause; that we have set our sights too low for the impact young people can make and it is time to raise our sights;
- began reforming his kingdom and rebuilding the temple as a twenty-six-year old, when most young people are graduating from college, and upon the stunning discovery of an ancient book, the book of Deuteronomy, in the temple, heard the reading of the scripture for the first time in his life and changed his life accordingly.

The Good News – Josiah Reforms The Nation!

There is little wonder that drastic reforms would follow these godly actions by King Josiah! Jeremiah carefully records some of Josiah's reforms in II Kings, chapter 23. Let us begin in verses 4 and 5a.

Then the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the doorkeepers, to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. He did away with the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed to burn incense . . .

Now, do not forget that the kings who set up the idols and appointed these priests were none other than Josiah's father and grandfather. Josiah was turning his back on decades of family practice. In an age when our past seems to be the great "excuser" for our present, Josiah teaches and encourages us that our past does not automatically disable our future walk with God.

Now, we will not take the time to cover all of the reforms that Josiah accomplished in detail, but let us move quickly through some of the verses.

Burned the Asherah – verse 6

Look at verse 6.

He brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord outside Jerusalem to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and ground it to dust, and threw its dust on the graves of the common people.

You may remember that Asherah was one of Baal's mistresses. Her name means, "Mother Earth". She had crept into the religious system, until finally, as this verse tells us, she found a home inside the temple. This was not the first time, nor will it be the last time, that the "Mother" image has been tied to religious worship.

We are also told that the dust of Asherah was scattered upon the common graves. This was not to desecrate the people, but to bring the image into contact with death – thus, defiling Asherah.

Broke down houses of male prostitutes – verse 7

Continue to verse 7a.

He also broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord . . .

Think about this verse. Homosexuality was a part of the religious ceremony, and the "apartments" where this was practiced were located inside the temple.

How in the world can this practice change from that which was considered then, and even today, as Romans, chapter 1, tells us, an abomination to the Lord and a sin to be run from, to being a part of religious ceremony? Well, look at our own nation. That which was once considered a sin in our own society, is now considered acceptable. And even further, it is now being ordained.

Defiled the place of child sacrifice – verse 10

Skip to verse 10.

He also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the sons of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech.

The place of child sacrifice was finally torn down. While some doubt the cruelty of such a place literally existing, archeologists, in our generation, have uncovered burial jars containing infant skeletons from the Topheth region. Firstborn children were sacrificed in order for their parents to understand the future and to please the false gods of paganism.

You may ask how anyone can sacrifice a child to know the future. In our society today, many are sacrificing the emotional and character development of their children so they can climb one more rung on the ladder.

Let me ask a question. Who built this place of child sacrifice? Was it Josiah's father Ammon, who was a wicked idolater? Was it Josiah's grandfather Manasseh, who served false gods for fifty years? No! It was Solomon, who, when he was in the process of throwing his life away, built this for his unbelieving wives. Josiah finally destroys this horrendous place of cruelty.

Did away with statues for Zodiac worship – verse 11

Continue to verse 11.

He did away with the horses which the kings of Judah had given to the sun, at the

entrance of the house of the Lord . . . and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire.

I have mentioned before that the Assyrian Zodiac was worshipped. The stars were followed and plans were made according to the movements of the sun, moon, and stars.

The chief astral deity was, of course, the sun. Chariots and horses played a big part in the worship of the sun. They believed that the sun god drove his fiery chariot across the sky. In this text, we are told that huge statues were created depicting the horses of the sun god – and placed at the entrance to the temple, of all places.

The last part of verse 11 refers to the chariots of the sun. They were, no doubt, stunning and beautiful to see.

My wife and I lived in Irving, Texas, while I attended seminary. Nearby, in the small town of Las Colinas, there was a large commercial office building. In the courtyard, they had a display that would literally stop traffic when it was seen for the first time. A well known sculptor had crafted life size bronze horses. There were four or five of them, including a young colt. They were fashioned as though they were in full gallop and running through a stream of water. Water jets or fountains had been arranged so that wherever the hoof of each horse touched the water, water would be splashing around. It was breathtaking.

I can only imagine the display of horses and chariots dedicated to the sun god described in this verse as being equally stunning and breathtaking! Josiah melted them down and destroyed the images to false gods that had so captivated the Israelite people.

Dealt with false priests – verse 9

Let me add one more note. The false priests who carried out the false religion are mentioned throughout this chapter. Some would evidently believe, although others, as we are told in verse 9 especially, never really repented.

Many believe that the Hebrew word for “priest” comes from the root word meaning, “to be black”. These priests evidently, in their opposition to the worship of Yahweh, whose followers will, according to Revelation, one day be dressed in white, were dressed in black robes, black head pieces, and black sandals.

Destroyed an ancient altar and fulfilled a prophecy concerning Josiah – verses 17 - 18

Now, let me point out a prophetic fulfillment. Look at verses 17 through 18a, as Josiah goes to Bethel to destroy the ancient altar there.

Then he said, “What is this monument that I see?” And the men of the city told him, “It is the grave of the man of God who came from Judah and proclaimed these things which you have done against the altar of Bethel.” He said “Let him alone; let no one disturb his bones.” . . .

Turn back to I Kings, chapter 13, and look at verses 1 and 2.

Now behold, there came a man of God from Judah to Bethel by the word of the Lord, while Jeroboam was standing by the altar to burn incense. He cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, “O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice [execute] the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.’”

Josiah is coming! This was some three hundred years from that day to the day we are now studying. Not one word of God shall fall to the earth; what God says will happen, will happen.

Can you imagine Josiah’s father, ungodly Ammon, choosing a name for his newborn son? He might have said, “Let’s see, what will we call him? Let’s call him Josiah. Maybe he will grow to dishonor the God of Israel as I have done.”

Yet, even in the name Ammon chose, God’s will was done. It is as Jesus Christ said, recorded in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 18b, “. . . I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

Voltaire, the French antagonist, declared war on Christianity with his pen and paper. He vowed to wipe out Christianity with his own reason. The French philosopher did not accept the tenets of Christianity. He even predicted that Christianity would be swept from existence and passed into history within one hundred years of his lifetime. Voltaire died in 1778. In 1828, fifty years after his death, the Geneva Bible Society moved into his house. They began using Voltaire’s own printing press to produce

thousands of Bibles which were distributed worldwide.

Isaiah, chapter 40, verse 8, tells us, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”

Josiah discovered the unquenchable, unshakable book of the law and obeyed.

Celebrated the Passover

What occurs next is the grandest celebration of the Passover seen in that generation. Turn to II Chronicles, chapter 35, and look at verses 17 and 18 of Ezra’s account of Josiah.

Thus the sons of Israel who were present celebrated the Passover at that time, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days. There had not been celebrated a Passover like it in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet; nor had any of the kings of Israel celebrated such a Passover as Josiah did with the priests, the Levites, all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

It is as if Ezra is saying, “You’ve never seen anything like this before! It was unbelievable! Even going all the way back to the days of Samuel, this has not been seen!”

Why? Because Josiah had come into contact with the word and said, “We are supposed to live like that.”

And, Josiah re-instituted the Passover.

Two lessons while the sun shone brightly

Let me draw from Josiah’s biography, two critical lessons for us all.

What God has written in the past teaches us how to live in the present

1. First, what God has written in the past teaches us how to live in the present.

Some would say, “The Bible is an old book.”

It is old, but it has an inspired source. And, according to Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 8, God “is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Do not forget that the book of Deuteronomy, which was discovered as they rebuilt the temple, changed Josiah’s life. How many books do we have?

We have many more books in our Bible. How should they impact us?

What God has prescribed in the past teaches us how to worship in the present

2. Secondly, what God has prescribed in the past teaches us how to worship in the present.

Look at verse 19 of II Chronicles, chapter 35.

In the eighteenth year of Josiah’s reign this Passover was celebrated.

For Josiah, this was God’s prescribed way of worship. There was no superstition, no idol worship, no hocus pocus, no strange incantation in this celebration. Instead, there was a worship of God’s grace in passing over the Israelites when they had followed God’s method for redemption.

The Passover goes back to the days when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. As slaves, they were told, “If you want to be freed and safe, kill a lamb. Then, apply the blood of the lamb to the doorposts of your homes. When the death angel sweeps into Egypt, whoever has the blood applied will be passed over and liberated.”

The Hebrew word for Passover is “peçach,” which some believe to mean, “jump over”. The death angel would come to their house and jump over it when he saw the blood. That was God’s prescription and Josiah celebrated in remembrance of God’s grace.

Today, we celebrate a different kind of Passover, but in many ways, it is the fulfillment of that anti-type. We celebrate the blood of *the* Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! And those who are hearing this who apply the blood of *that* Lamb to their hearts, will be passed over when we stand before God to give an account; they will be free to enjoy heaven for all eternity.

The Sad News – Josiah Ignores the Admonition!

I wish this were the end of Josiah’s story. What a grand conclusion it would have made. However, as the Word of God so often does, it chooses not to hide, but to expose the failures of men and women. For that reason, the word encourages us in what to do, as well as warns us in what not to do.

Look at verse 20a of II Chronicles, chapter 35.

After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Neco king of Egypt came up to

make war at Carchemish on the Euphrates, .

..

Now, understand this is actually happening thirteen years after the Passover celebration. Thirteen years have zipped by between verse 19 and verse 20. Many of you may feel the same way and ask, “Where did those last thirteen years go?”

Well, between verses 19 and 20, the tape is on fast forward. We are given the last days of Josiah’s life. At this time, Egypt goes to war against the rising power which will one day be known as Babylon. Continue to verses 20b through 21.

. . . and Josiah went out to engage him. But Neco sent messengers to him, saying, “What have we to do with each other, O King of Judah? I am not coming against you today but against the house with which I am at war, and God has ordered me to hurry. Stop for your own sake from interfering with God who is with me, so that He will not destroy you.”

The warning from Neco was explicit. In fact, Neco used the name of God twice; the name Elohim. Look again as Neco says, “. . . God has ordered me to hurry.” The Hebrew verb means, “God is pressuring me; urging me to hurry.”

What a strange scene and what a strange messenger of warning from God. Nevertheless, the warning came – and Josiah refused to listen.

Unfortunately, we are never told what motivated Josiah to fight against Neco. Perhaps Josiah wanted a larger control over territory that was now available due to Babylon defeating Assyria. Josiah had been subjugated to Assyria, so perhaps he could now increase his own kingdom and power. We do not know exactly.

Historians tell us that Neco II, was a warlike prince. He was also a crafty business man who purchased two fleets of ships for trade and exploration. In fact, it was under his rule that Phoenician sailors first sailed to Africa.

You need to know that in the plan of God, Egypt would lose in their battle against young Babylon. This would end their dominating power in the middle east. Babylon would rise, as God’s word had prophesied. Babylon will carry Josiah’s kingdom into captivity. And, one of the young Jewish captives, named Daniel, will continue the story from there.

God knew what He was doing. As Acts, chapter 17, verse 26, declares, He determines the “appointed times and the boundaries” of every nation. He knew it was time for Assyria to fall and for Babylon to rise and for Judah to be carried away.

Josiah got in the way of God by not listening to the warning of God. Look at verses 22 through 24.

However, Josiah would not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to make war with him; nor did he listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to make war on the plain of Megiddo. The archers shot King Josiah, and the king said to his servants, “Take me away, for I am badly wounded.” So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in the second chariot which he had, and brought him to Jerusalem where he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah.

By and large, the message and testimony of Josiah’s life was positive. I can just imagine, Jeremiah preaching the funeral with tears. Look at verses 25 through 27.

Then Jeremiah chanted a lament for Josiah. And all the male and female singers speak about Josiah in their lamentations to this day. And they made them an ordinance in Israel; behold, they are also written in the Lamentations. Now the rest of the acts of Josiah and his deeds of devotion as written in the law of the Lord, and his acts, first to last, behold, they are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah.

Three warnings lest the sunshine turns to sadness

There are timeless lessons in Josiah’s story for all of us, in any generation, no matter how young or old we may be. The final acts of Josiah present three clear warnings to all of us who wish to walk in the light as God gives us life. Let me give them to you.

Spiritual deterioration that leads to disobedience does not occur without warning

1. The first warning is that spiritual deterioration that leads to disobedience does not occur without warning.

Another way to word this warning is that spiritual collapse never happens overnight, and it never happens without God being able to say, "I told you so!"

You never disobey God without ample warning. In fact, there is really no such thing as falling into sin; you walk into it with your eyes wide open; you run toward sin; you leave your business card or telephone number out so sin knows where to reach you; you call out for sin so it knows you are available.

Sin may start with a small act. It may begin with just one date with a non-Christian; just one lunch with a married man; just one bad check; just one sip or snort; just one magazine; just one shortcut here and another one there. Do not ever say, once you are stranded spiritually or you are bankrupt morally, "It just happened so fast, I didn't have a chance."

Oh no! This sermon alone, is just one more way that God is flashing a warning light at you. Can you see it?!

The warning to Josiah came from the lips of an unbeliever. It was a warning that should have driven him to the true prophets of God. Jeremiah was on call, yet we do not read that he was ever consulted.

Making wise decisions in youth does not guarantee wise decisions will be made in old age

2. The second warning from Josiah's collapse is that making wise decisions in youth does not guarantee wise decisions will be made in old age.

C. H. Macintosh wrote a century ago, in his commentary, *Genesis Notes*,

Many a vessel has sailed out of harbor in gallant style with all its canvass spread; amid cheering and shouting, and with many a promise of a first-rate passage; but alas! Storms, waves, rocks and quicksands have changed the aspect of things; and the vessel that commenced with hope has ended in disaster.

That is another way of saying that there is never a point in your life when you can coast on the past. The New Testament is filled with exhortations to the believer to be alert; to be on guard. You do not coast to the finish line, but as Paul said, like an Olympic runner, you race to the finish line to finish well.

I recently watched the Olympic women's "4 by 100" relay. The anchor of the American team was pressing down that track; she was flying. The competition was breathing down her neck. For the last fifteen or twenty steps, she fought the competitors off. The television camera showed her grimacing; she was giving it everything she could give it. And, she won the gold medal!

That is the picture of the Christian experience. We are racing; we are running; we are pushing and pursuing. We desire not only to start well, but to end well.

The best time to walk with God is not yesterday, and not some day; the best time to walk with God is today

3. The final warning is that the best time to walk with God is not yesterday, and not some day; the best time to walk with God is today.

My boyhood home had a plaque with a similar, familiar phrase. It hung where everyone could read, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

I do not know what your past has been like and no one knows what your future holds. However, I do know, on the authority of God's word, the best time to walk with God is now!

David Livingstone, the famous missionary to Africa, wrote in his journal in 1871, the words, "Oh my Father, help me to finish my work in Thine honour."

The only way you and I can join ranks with those like David Livingstone is to walk with God today. Our song should be,

In my life Lord, be glorified, be glorified;

In my life Lord, be glorified today.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/4/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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