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Manasseh - Worse than Before

2 Kings 21

Introduction

When I was a good bit younger I visited my grandparents with the family, and I drove the car. It was a cold Winter's day in Linthouse, and by the time we were heading home it was getting dark. We bundled into the car and started off back home. The windscreen had got quite dirty with all the salt on the road, so I sprayed the windscreen washers to clear it. Instant ice! And I couldn't see a thing, driving along at 30mph. In trying to make visibility a bit better I'd made it ten times worse than when we started.

We've been reading through 2 Kings, following the two kingdoms of the separated Israel. These were God's people, put there to be a beacon to the nations. They had replaced the heathen nations in the land, who had been so wicked that God wanted them removed from the face of the Earth. And now what? God tells them they are worse than the nations who were there before them. How did it get like this?

How Bad Can You Get?

Last week we were looking at Hezekiah. The passage told us he was a man who followed God, and honoured him. We read about his prayer when he found he had a deadly disease, and about the extra 15 years that were added to his life. How did we come to such a polar opposite with his son Manasseh?

Well perhaps those 15 years weren't such a blessing to Hezekiah as they seemed. We also read last week about the envoys that came from Babylon. What did Hezekiah do with these visitors? He showed them all the riches in his treasure house, all in his storehouses and all that was in his armoury. Why did he do that? Presumably it was pride in his own riches. Isaiah prophesied that all these treasures would be taken away to Babylon, along with his own descendants. What was Hezekiah's response?

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?" [2 Kings 20 v 19]

He was so self-centred by this time that he hadn't a care for his country, or even his own children. Perhaps this is starting to produce a pattern in his son.

The Bible scholars who have looked at the dates of the kings' reigns suggest that the reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh overlap by about 10 years. This would make sense. Hezekiah knew his days were numbered so training his son up from when he reached the age of 12 and was seen as a young man seems like a good idea. You would hope he would train him in the ways of the Lord. But either he didn't or they didn't stick, as Manasseh went fully for a multi-faith approach.

Let's look at the list of his rejections of God, and adoption of false gods from the countries around him.

*And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. For he **rebuilt the high places** that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he **erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah**, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and **worshiped all the host of heaven** and served them. And he **built altars in the house of the LORD**, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem will I put my name." And he **built altars for all the host of heaven** in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he **burned his son as an offering** and **used fortune-telling and omens** 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 Asherah that he had made he set in the house** of which the LORD 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. And I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander anymore out of the land that I gave to their fathers, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the Law that my servant Moses commanded them." But they did not listen, **and Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.** [2 Kings 21 v 2-9]*

Remember the desecration of Ahaz? This guy seems to have gone further. He did have a reign of 55 years to put these things in place, but it seems he was dedicated to introduce worship of all the false gods he could find. And we must remember this was not just the king. The people were in line with him in his false god worship.

Note that the country probably wasn't doing all that bad in terms of quality of life. They were a vassal to Assyria, but seemed to have a favourable status. They were probably doing quite well for themselves physically. But their spiritual state was rock bottom. How much can we see this is true for our city and country today as well?

Now this seems a ridiculously bad list of sins, and maybe we think we can distance ourselves from Manasseh, because he was so bad. But these are things we can all fall prey to. I'm sure none of us would ever consider putting our children through the fires of Molech, but think about the other things he was doing:

- Putting other things before God
- Spoiling the place of worship
- Dabbling in fortune tellers, mediums and so on

We might be tempted to think of these things light heartedly. "They're just a bit of fun. We know they're just making it up anyway." And yet using fortune tellers and mediums are in the list of ways in which Manasseh disobeyed God. Even if we know they're fake, we are still replacing the things of God with alternatives, that are no good for us.

We also should not think that the worship of false gods was harmless, if ineffective. Some of the practises in worshipping these gods were horrific, not least the one we've already mentioned of giving children over to the fire for Molech. Look at verse 16:

Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. [2 Kings 21 v 16]

What innocent blood was spilled? Children sacrificed to the gods? Or possibly his enemies. Possibly the men of God who opposed his blasphemy and tried to tell him his practises were evil. Whoever it was, if the streets are running with blood that's a fair sign that something is badly wrong.

Is this the worst king that Judah has seen?

God's Response

God's response was simple and emphatic. The people were to be taken away.

And the Lord said by his servants the prophets, "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day." [2 Kings 21 v 10-15]

There are several images the prophets use here:

1. The disaster that the Lord will bring will make the ears tingle of everyone who hears it. We live in a world where news travels around the world in seconds. When something bad happens to someone we know about it right away. And people want to hear, to comment, to judge. Well the ancient world wasn't so different. This disaster was going to fall on God's people, and those in the surrounding countries would lap up the news.
2. Jerusalem was to be measured. Just as God had measured Samaria and found them wanting, resulting in the northern kingdom being invaded and removed wholesale, scattered to the four winds. Just as God had measured the house of Ahab, found them to be wicked and caused the removal of every one of them.
3. God was going to wipe Jerusalem like a dish, clearing away all the debris, even to the point of turning it upside down so that every last bit was gone.
4. Their enemies were going to hunt them down, like prey, and take them away as spoil. Not just the treasures that Hezekiah had shown them but the people too.

So it doesn't look good for the people of Judah. Is there any hope for them? What if the next king is a good one? Well in the final verses of the chapter we see that Manasseh's son, Amon, continued in the same vein. However we're going to find out in the next few weeks that the king after Amon, Josiah, did very well, turning himself and the people back to God. But if we sneak a look ahead we see that it wasn't enough.

Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the Lord said, "I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there." [2 Kings 23 v 26-27]

Josiah did great work for the Lord, and yet because of the sins of Manasseh, Judah were still going to be removed.

Even the Worst Can Receive Mercy

When we look at these evil people in the Bible there often seems to be a spark of grace, a faint light of hope. Remember Ahaz, the desecrator. He brought a replacement altar into the temple, worshipped false Gods, and yet Isaiah prophesied to him one of the most famous passages relating to the coming Messiah.

Manasseh seems to have been even worse than Ahaz. Surely there is nothing good to be said about his life or his reign. It certainly seems so reading this chapter, and the other mentions of him in the book of Kings confirms this.

And yet, God is able to show mercy to the worst of the worst. Manasseh's story is told in the book of Chronicles too, and it's mostly the same, but there is one extra section:

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 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. [2 Chronicles 33 v 10-13]

Isn't that amazing? We don't know what period of Manasseh's life this was, but at some point he came to repentance, sought the mercy of God and was shown that mercy. He went on to remove a lot of the idols that he had set up in Jerusalem. What an encouragement that is to those of us who feel weighed down by our sin. We are right to feel like that, but must also remember that God is merciful, and is able to give mercy to the worst of sinners.

This little section is also a mini illustration of what was going to happen to the Jews in Judah. Notice that Manasseh was taken away to Babylon for his sins. There he was humbled and sought the Lord, prayed to him and in his mercy God restored him to Jerusalem. This is exactly what is going to happen to the Jews. They will be taken into exile in Babylon, in

chains, where they will cry out to the Lord, and after 70 years the Lord will restore them back to their land, to Jerusalem and Judah.

Application

What can we learn from Manasseh? The dangers of looking to false gods and polluting our worship is an obvious lesson. The effect of sin on our lives and on the lives of those around us is another. But there's also a huge encouragement that when repentance is truly shown, God is merciful to even the worst of us. Let us praise him for that.