

Who do you think you are? We are looking at some people in the family tree of Jesus during August. Last week looking at Mary and Joseph we saw Jesus was both God and man. Today we go some way back in his family tree to Josiah. This was after the northern Kingdom of Israel had been captured by Assyria but before the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians. We are in about the year 622BC.

1. Josiah's background and character

Just a quick glance back to 2 Kings 21 tells us Josiah was the son of Amon and grandson of Manasseh, both of whom were bad kings who brought in the worship of false gods. You have to go back over 50 years to the last good King Hezekiah. However, despite that, what we see from 2 Kings 22:2 is that Josiah was different to his father and grandfather. Here was a king who we see was a true son of David not just physically but spiritually. He was a man who sought after God and walked the right way.

2. Josiah's actions as King

Josiah is seen as the great reforming King.

If we look at 2 Chronicles 34:3 we see something of the beginning of his reforms of the spiritual life of the nation, "In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles, carved idols and cast images."

In the eighth year of his reign, that is when he was sixteen he began to seek God. In the climate of his day that was a remarkable thing and certainly considering his family background it was nothing short of a miracle. However we do see how God raises his children from the worst of backgrounds. Stephen Lungu is today the International Leader of African Evangelistic Enterprise. But in autobiography 'Freedom Fighter' (I think it is now called 'Out of the Dark Shadows') he tells of his background in what was then Rhodesia, "when the Communists found me I was a teenager living on my own under a bridge. My bed was a sandy grave I dug at night, my blanket and old sack. I could not read or write. I could not find a job." From such desperate beginning has come a great evangelist used by God.

In the 12th year of his reign that is when he was 20 he began to reform the worship of his nation undoing the evil practices of the past that the true worship of God might carry on unhindered.

As we come back to 2 Kings we see in the passage we have read how the Temple was being restored, whether that was part of his reforms is not clear. However during the restoration, as we see in v8, Hilkiah the High Priest had discovered the book of the Law. What that means is not clear but possibly what we know as Deuteronomy, which is God's word through Moses.

The book was given to Shaphan, Josiah's secretary, who read it and then took it to Josiah and v10 read it to him.

Here is a key moment how will the King react to the word of God?

The answer is clear in v11 he tore his robes a sign of repentance. Then as we move on to Chap 23 we see how he did much more in that he obeyed the word of God in three ways.

Firstly, 23:3 Josiah renewed the covenant between God and his people. He committed himself "to follow the LORD and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book," and the people signed up with him. God was restored as God.

Secondly as we follow of vs4-20 we see him destroying the symbols and artefacts of the false religions his father and grandfather had brought in. It is never enough simply to bow to God we must remove the false idols from our lives as well. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way, "let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:1-2). If God was being restored as God then he and he alone should be worshipped by his people. There was and there is no room for any other God beside him.

Thirdly as part of that worship of God Josiah restored, 23:21, the Passover celebration. This is not just the restoration of a festival. Occasionally you'll read about some village or town picking up a festival that hasn't happened for many years but this is not what these verses are about. The Passover was part of the life of the Jewish people, part of their history with God. It was a huge part of their story of salvation and to forget it and not celebrate it was to forget who they were and where they had come from as a people under God. Josiah restored the Passover.

We need to take a moment to appreciate what God did in and through Josiah and the important part the word of God played in his life and his reign. For 13 years following his reading of the book of the Law he sought to lead the people back to God and establish them once more as the people of God.

The history of the people of God is marked by many times of reformation and revival. At the moment I'm reading about George Whitefield who preached to thousands out of doors during what's known as the 'Great Awakening' in the mid 18th Century. With him too it began with the word of God. Here was a man who tried to be religious but finally in 1735 through studying Bishop Joseph Hall's writings on the crucifixion he began to see that his actions were not enough. In the book he read 'Thou barest our sins....thou didst take flesh for our redemption.' It struck Whitefield that "Man's puny efforts to redeem himself whether by praying in a storm in Christ Church walk or schooling his passions or dispensing charity were incapable of doing what Jesus had already done. Had already done! Christ had already borne the burden. The new birth was a gift."

God's word changed Whitefield and set him on a path that was to bring thousands to faith under God's gracious hand.

With Josiah it was different but the word of God set him on a path to revive the faith of his people. For you and I it may well be much less but it is that word which can shape and mould our lives drawing us closer to God and opening us to be used of him.

Josiah was a good and great King and his obituary is there in 23:25, "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses."

That was some obituary. But the next word is "nevertheless" and leads us on to

3. Josiah a King too late,

"Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him to anger. So the LORD said, "I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, 'There shall my Name be.'"(2 Kings 23:26-27) – ouch!

Josiah was a King too late. God had already announced his judgement on the people and Josiah knew that. If we go back to 22:12-20 we see how

having had the word of the law he sought the prophetic word and was told that God's judgement was set against Judah. However God would be merciful to Josiah and that judgement would happen after his death.

In the light of that it is pretty amazing that Josiah went ahead with all the reforms but he was clear God should be honoured because he is God. But he knew that ultimately all the reforms would not save his people from the wrath of God.

In this we see the implacable wrath of God. The actions of Manasseh and the people with him had put the people of Judah beyond the line of hope. God had pronounced his judgement. In the light of that notice if you will two things. The first is that wrath was tempered by mercy. God had mercy on Josiah and held back his wrath till after Josiah had died. That still works today. We await the return of the Lord Jesus Christ knowing that it will bring in the Judgement. We wonder why that day has not come as it surely will and we find part of the answer in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The mercy of God holding back his wrath and judgement.

The second thing to note is that Josiah good as he was could not turn aside God's judgement. He was good. He restored the temple. He set the book of the law before the people. He renewed the covenant with God. He removed the false gods and their worship. He re-established the Passover and its meaning for God's people. No one could have done more and yet all this could not remove the sins of his forefathers. "Not all the blood of beasts On Jewish altars slain Could give the guilty conscience peace Or wash away the stain" as Isaac Watts wrote. This is where Josiah points us to Jesus and as the second verse of that hymn says, "But Christ, the heav'nly Lamb, Takes all our sins away; A sacrifice of nobler name And richer blood than they."

What King Josiah could not do King Jesus has done and the mercy offered by God is that through Jesus and his death we no longer face the judgement. As we read in John, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36) and "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (John 5:24).

Josiah was good King in the line of David but in order to take away the sin of the people we need great David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Josiah points us clearly towards Jesus and our need of him to take away the wrath of God.

4. A summary of Josiah

As we trace the family tree of Jesus back through countless Kings we see very few who were truly men of God but Josiah was one who was. Here was a man who sought after God and who was ready to hear God's word when it came to him and then was obedient to the will of God in all that he did and sought to do for the people of God and why, why was he obedient? The answer is there in 2 Kings 22:19, "Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD." Josiah had a soft heart and so when he heard the word of God his heart was able to change and that brought about obedience. Today we have already heard that warning from Psalm 95:7-9, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did." Here is the root of the faithful life with God, a soft heart which is sensitive to the word and will of God and open to his leading rather than our own.

I think that is the lesson that we are left with from Josiah of the soft heart meaning we are ready and willing to obey the will of God and be used in his service.

Just going back to Lifeshapes the heptagon has the acronym Mrs Gren and is about checking the vital signs of our spiritual life. The 'S' stands for sensitivity and we spoke about being sensitive to God's spirit which then brings the 'M' of movement. Josiah had what we might call a soft heart, was sensitive to God's prompting and acted as a result. It is as we have soft hearts and are sensitive to God and his word that we move in the way God would have us go. That pleases God and is a blessing to us.

One afternoon last week I was coming back from Tesco and came across a dog running free. It was followed by its owner pushing a buggy. As we walked together for a while I remarked that she had no lead for the dog and she said the dog was obedient and wouldn't cross a road unless told. At that she called and the dog came running from the trees by the church and walked with us to the Reading road and waited to be allowed across and then ran on. Walking further up the road a man came out with two large dogs on leads. He didn't get far before they were pulling in different directions and he had to stop and try and wrestle them back in line. "Looks like you're not going far" I said as I passed. "Yes," he replied, "you have to be patient".

Now I realise we are children of God not his dogs but clearly what God looks for is our sensitivity to his word so that we are walking with him not pulling against him. As we do that we please him and receive many blessings. Josiah was a king with a soft and sensitive heart but what about me and what about you? Is my heart soft? Am I ready to hear and obey the word of God?

But we mustn't miss that Josiah was a limited king and his inability to turn away the wrath of God points us towards the greater king who would come and whose death and resurrection would turn away that wrath that we through him might know forgiveness and restoration as children of God.

Who do you think you are Jesus? The true king.