

2 Chronicles 33:1-16
Manasseh's Rebellion, Ruin, Repentance, Redemption, and Renewal
June 20, 2010

(Rebellion) Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

He took the carved image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever. I will not again make the feet of the Israelites leave the land I assigned to your forefathers, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them concerning all the laws, decrees and ordinances given through Moses." But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Israel astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites.

The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention.

(Ruin) So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles, and took him to Babylon.

(Repentance) In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.

(Redemption) And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.

(Renewal) Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah.

He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. (NIV)

You might recall that shortly after the death of King Solomon, Israel split in two—the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. Over 200 years later a man named Hezekiah became king of the Southern Kingdom. Hezekiah carried out quite a reformation, getting the Southern Kingdom back on track spiritually.

When Hezekiah died, his young son Manasseh took over. That's when the rebellion started, and that's where our text starts: "*Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them.*"

Maybe you're so used to hearing of these sorts of things in the Old Testament that they have lost their capacity to shock you. It's become such a familiar refrain that we hardly even hear it any more.

Let's pause for a moment and look at these things a bit closer. Bowing down to the "starry hosts", to the sun, moon, and stars—how insulting to the God who had created them! Creation being worshiped instead of the Creator!

As for the high places, the Baals, and the Asherah poles, this didn't happen because of the misguidedness of an uninformed youth. Manasseh "rebuilt" the high places—on purpose—even though his father had destroyed them. Nor was he misguided in that he thought this was just another form of worshiping the true God. The things that took place as part of Baal worship and Asherah worship were so foul and so far removed from the worship of the true God that no one could possibly mistake the one for the other. Manasseh knew what he was doing, and what he was doing was consciously abandoning the worship of the God of Israel.

Actually, it's too gentle for us to say that he "abandoned" the worship of God. No, it wasn't enough for him to simply ignore the temple and its worship. Instead, "*He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, 'My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever.' In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts...He took the carved image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, 'In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever.'*" God may have put his name on that temple, but Manasseh was pretty intent on erasing it—and with a vengeance. He made a point of bringing the blasphemous worship right into the house of God—the house that God had built as a lasting honeymoon suite for himself and his people! If God was a groom and his people Israel were a bride, Manasseh was cheating on God—right in front of his face! Even the basest unfaithful spouse wouldn't dream of such a thing!

But if Manasseh was treating God the Father with disrespect, it's not surprising, since family didn't rank real highly for him. The author of our text goes on to say, "*He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom...*" Now it's true that the footnote in the NIV offers "he made his sons pass through [the fire]" as an alternative translation—as though he merely made them do something roughly equivalent to walking a few yards on hot coals.

And it's true that such a translation can't be entirely ruled out. But I wonder if it's offered as a translation because the actual translation is just too awful to consider. "Do you mean he was so evil that he actually murdered his own children as part of his 'worship' of these gods? It's not possible!"

Of course it's possible! In recent years millions of parents have sacrificed their unborn sons and daughters to the gods of Convenience, Career, and Cash. Why should we be surprised that Manasseh did something similar?

After all, Manasseh wasn't just in bed with false gods, but he was intimate with Satan himself, for we read that he "*practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists.*"

Wallowing in the occult, worshiping the sun, moon, and stars, getting into bed with false gods. Can anything more be said about Manasseh besides what the text says next: "*He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.*"

Actually, there can. When the writer of Kings describes Manasseh, he says in what is probably only a mild overstatement, "*Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end...*" (2 Kings 21:16)

And the Apostle Paul thought **he** was the chief of sinners! Compared to an accomplished professional like Manasseh, Paul was a rank amateur at sinning.

Surely Manasseh entered that perverse pantheon of men like Hitler—men who, by “provoking God to anger” have done so to such an extent that eternity in Hell isn’t good enough for them. No, their suffering and judgment must start already here on earth.

So it is with no small satisfaction that we read of God causing the King of Assyria to put a hook in the nose of Manasseh so that he might be led around in the most humiliating—not to mention fairly painful—manner possible. Bound with bronze shackles, he was forced to walk—18 inches at a time (depending on how much chain was between the shackles—to captivity in Babylon.

Rebellion had led to ruin, and it couldn’t have happened to someone more deserving.

Unless it happened to us—because we deserve it every bit as much as he did. As the bride of Christ, we have so often let something come between us and instead of Christ. More than that, we’ve even done it at times quite casually, as though our unfaithfulness to God is a bit of a joke.

Although our fathers and mothers—or perhaps some other person who served as our spiritual father and mother—made a concerted effort to tear down the high places we were in danger of bowing down to, we turned around and built them right back up because—well, just because we liked to.

And while we have perhaps not literally shed enough blood to fill Cottonwood from end to end, if all the times we brushed past someone else and their needs were poured out, we’d at the very least need hip waders to avoid being stained by the guilt of our sins and rebellion.

And that’s exactly what it is—rebellion. At least Manasseh could maybe claim that his were the sins of youth. At least the Apostle Paul could say that he had persecuted the church of God in ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13), without really understanding what he was doing. Many of us no longer have youth as an “excuse” for our sins, and none of us have ignorance as an excuse. The vast majority of the times that we sin, we are well aware of what God wants, and our sin is nothing less than outright rebellion, which “*provokes God to anger.*”

Surely for us, ruin will also follow rebellion.

But out of Manasseh’s ruin came something amazing. Sitting in the ruins of his life, Manasseh found repentance followed by redemption. Like his New Testament counterpart, the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), who also had to have a hook figuratively put in his nose before he came to his senses, Manasseh sat in the pigsty and slop that his life had become and thought to himself, “I have sinned.” Nothing particularly revelatory about that!

But he also thought to himself, “God is merciful.” Perhaps faintly rattling around one of the many dark corners of Manasseh’s soul was a barely recalled ray of light like the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple: “*When [your people] sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to the enemy, who takes them captive to his own land, far away or near; and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their conquerors and say, ‘We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly’; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their fathers, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. (1 Kings 8:46-49)*

Perhaps Manasseh saw both himself and the solution in those words, and turned to God in repentance for sin and trust of God’s forgiveness through the coming Savior.

Now I know what a lot of people would think when they hear this. They'd think, "Oh, how convenient! Like hundreds of other lowlifes both before him and after him, when the bills came through and the rent came due, Manasseh 'found God.' How convenient! But no—someone who's burned that many bridges can't expect to now use one built out of a "jailhouse confession' to walk out of Hell back into God's good graces. It's not that easy."

And no, it's not that easy. The God who has been provoked to anger **will** most certainly give voice to that righteous anger, and he **will** exercise justice. And he most certainly did so 2000 years ago during Holy Week. It wasn't a humiliating hook in the nose for God's Son Jesus, but instead a crown of thorns and mocking worship from Roman soldiers whom he had created. It wasn't bronze shackles for Jesus, but instead the chains of the sins of the world, each one of whose wages was death. Everything Manasseh deserved, Jesus got. Everything you deserve, Jesus received instead.

Why? Because God is merciful. Because God is a God who will listen even to someone like Manasseh when he repents. We read, "*In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom.*" When the ruin which God graciously allows to come to us in response to our rebellion—as in the case of Manasseh and the Prodigal Son, and Paul, to whom Jesus said, "*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*" (Acts 26:14)—when God has led us to see that rebellion against him leads to temporal and eventually eternal ruin, when God has used that to lead us to repentance, there we find redemption and renewal in Jesus. Through him we are brought back into his kingdom and his family and assured that we have a place—yes, even a throne—waiting for us in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Manasseh's throne was waiting for him when he returned to Jerusalem. But Manasseh used it considerably differently than he had previously. In fact, he used it **entirely** differently. We read that "*He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel.*"

Of course he did. Redemption through Jesus motivates us to renewal worked in us by the Holy Spirit. What foreign gods do you need to remove from your life today? And remembering that renewal is not merely a matter of driving sin out of your heart but also enthroning Jesus in your heart, how can you "restore the altar" of the Lord in your life?

What hope we find in the story of Manasseh! Yes, he was and will forever be one of the kings most identified with the decay of Israel, but even he is forgiven. And so also are we. To both rebellious Manasseh and rebellious you apply the fearsome, ruinous words of this morning's epistle lesson: "*Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10) But to repentant Manasseh and repentant you apply the restorative, redemptive words that follow: "*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*" (1 Corinthians 6:11). May those words and the story of Manasseh lead you to respond as the woman in this morning's gospel reading (Luke 7:36-50) did—with renewal, with a zeal to worship and praise the King of Kings. Amen.