

# Huldah Warns the People

Our story begins with Judah, the southern kingdom of the Jews, where the fabled city of David and Solomon was



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located, along with the temple of the true and living God, in Jerusalem. But the glory days are long gone, faith in God has been reduced to public rituals and the land is blighted with altars to pagan gods.

The leading characters are King Josiah, who came to the throne at the age of eight and ruled for thirty-one years, and a prophetess named Huldah, the wife of a court official. No explanation is given for this youthful king's interest in the "old faith" after a long line of evil rulers, but the turning point is marked by the rediscovery of the "book of law" when workmen were repairing the rundown temple at the king's order. When Jehoshaphat the scribe read the book (probably Deuteronomy) to the young king, Josiah "tore his clothes" as a symbol of repentance (22:11-13). Scripture plainly says that Josiah "did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (22:2) and "turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might" (23:25). Generations later Jesus emphasized the way of truth faith in God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). It appears to me that the young king looked at the terrible history of his predecessors, listened to his advisors and understood that to repeat the past would only mean more tragedy.

Josiah is a remarkable example of God using one person to impact a nation, but notice that Josiah involved members of his government, the high priest and sought the spiritual guidance of a faithful prophetess. In the process, Judah faced the tragic and vile events of the years after King David and discovered what they could become once again by God's grace.

The sobering truth is that the sins of the past are ingrained in the thinking of the people, so there must be more than the restoration of the temple, the public reading of holy books, observing rituals and sacrifices and a sense of entitlement as God's people. Faith in God must be personal within each generation, shaping attitudes and actions. Huldah does not

preach a return to greatness for Judah, instead offering a warning that sin against God results in consequences that continue to unfold in the future.

More was involved than making the temple shine again because the people had embraced too many ideas of the corrupt world. So Josiah's reform also included the destruction of pagan altars and high places, outlawing pagan worship rituals and the banishing of "mediums, wizards, household gods, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah" (23:24). Passover, the celebration of God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt and God's ultimate statement of love for the people was reinstated. Josiah sought to place God back in the center of their personal and cultural lives, a task that can only be accomplished by the working of God's Spirit in a willing people.

Scholars have noted that there were other prophets at work during this time, including Jeremiah, but God used Huldah to touch Josiah's heart. Huldah is plainspoken as she warns that one day God will "bring disaster" on Judah (22:16). This does not refute the idea of God's forgiveness and grace. Rather, it is a warning that people all too easily return to selfishness and evil, forgetting the lessons of the past. Old Testament narratives remind us clearly that humanity has a very short memory concerning God's truth and love. But Huldah also declares that God promises Josiah blessings in his lifetime of faithfulness and that his "eyes shall not see all the disaster that I (God) will bring on this place" (22:20). The great revival of Josiah's reign did not last. From beginning to end the Bible warns us of suffering and tragedy when we exclude God from our lives, yet also reminds us there is hope and healing in God's love if we will turn trust him day by day.

Frequently I hear media pronouncements that one person can make a difference in the world. But all the inspiring stories about people helping others show that the greatest results come when many join the one. Then the many build support, expand the life-changing actions, and build longevity. One king, one politician, one visionary, one generous donor cannot bring lasting success, but they can together impact the world. Josiah could not guarantee that the following generation would continue in

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his footsteps, but he did all he could. Faith must be new in each heart and generation or it fades away. Society may influence our decisions, but the grace of God can not only urge us to the right choices it can empower us to grow in faith for a lifetime. With God's help we will not "turn aside to the right or to the left" (22:2).

We call ourselves a Christian nation, yet we are divided by class, income, race, education, gender, politics and religion. Daily we are assaulted by tragic and ugly stories, by cruel and deceptive political rhetoric, and by immorality. As in Josiah's time, there are religious voices that link God with immorality, selfishness, and hatred. The world has not changed since Josiah's day. Although you cannot end the tragedies of each day, you can make a difference in your family, community, and workplace simply by speaking and living out the example of Jesus.

The truth of the Bible displays its hope most clearly in those who dare to love and act out God's truth. We need to study the Bible and seek the leading of God's Spirit every day. Josiah was a king who used the power of his government and the temple to call Judea back to God. We do not combine church and state because such a partnership in our world foments oppression and discrimination. It didn't work out so well in Josiah's day either. In spite of Josiah's considerable power and influence he could not change anyone's heart. The church as an institution can do wonderful things, but our personal example and influence is God's most powerful tool when we are surrendered to him.

Josiah knew he had only his lifetime to draw Israel back to God and he dedicated himself to that task. The great saints of the Old and New Testaments understood they had only their lifetime, but they also knew that God's Messiah was coming. Huldah warned the people that they were rushing headlong into disaster. She also encouraged a young king to make a difference in his lifetime. God blessed until that day the people walked away from him again. Today is our day to serve God, to love as God has loved us, to speak the truth and hope of Jesus Christ, which is still the hope of God in this shattered world.

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.*