

Josiah's Reform

You would think that after the chosen people had:

- Overthrown the city of Jericho (thanks to a miracle of God)
- Won victory after victory over the Canaanites
- Built their capital city of Jerusalem, under Solomon
- Built a magnificent temple to God (under Solomon) and
- Gained a reputation of prosperity and power



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that Israel would be a shining monument to faith in God.

Instead, Solomon's reign is the pinnacle, followed by the division of Israel. The two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, preserved their identity as the dynasty of David, while the other ten tribes rebelled against the descendants of David and drifted ever farther from God. The "chronicler" records the reign of twenty kings of Judah while spending little time on the northern kingdom.

Josiah is a champion in the history of Israel (chapters 34-35). His name means "the Lord heals," and he reflects the character of Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon as a great leader anointed by God. It was under Josiah's thirty-year reign that the Jerusalem temple was repaired, the book of the Law was discovered, the feast of Passover was reinstated, and the southern kingdom returned to its roots of faith in God. This chronicle of their history was the source of great inspiration for the Jews exiled in Babylon, a guide for what they could become once again if they truly turned their hearts to God.

About 350 years after Solomon's reign the temple had become little more than a curious relic of a great past, but when King Josiah was sixteen he began to seek the God of his ancestor David (2 Chr. 34:3). At twenty, Josiah began purging idol worship from Judah and at age twenty-six he commissioned two court officials, Shaphan and Joah, to direct the refurbishing of the temple. Even in those unsettled years the temple staff had been maintained, and it was Hilkiah the high

priest who found the "book of the law" or "book of the covenant" (v. 30). This scroll was most likely what we know today as Deuteronomy. Josiah's reforms reflect the teachings of Deuteronomy, focusing on worship rituals in the temple and the eradication of the high places of pagan worship in the land.

How did Solomon's splendid temple and the key worship practices of Israel fade from their culture? Gradually – through indifference, preoccupation with success and power, or fading memories of the past – the people replaced faith in God with the common goals of the world. The disinterest of Josiah's predecessors was certainly a big influence as well.

A casual study of Christian history reveals countless examples of faith in God being overwhelmed by political influences, social custom, and incessant selfishness. The greatest threat to faith in God is not organized opposition, but the human longing to build kingdoms and establish power. History books and contemporary news coverage prove this desire is always current.

The high priest Hilkiah recognized the scroll as the law of God, so he took it to Shaphan, the king's overseer of the temple, who took it to the king. Upon hearing Shaphan read the scroll aloud, King Josiah began to realize how he and the nation had disobeyed God's laws for decades (v. 21). Josiah sent the high priest to seek another opinion of this startling discovery. Hilkiah seeks out a religious authority, a female prophet named Huldah, who verifies this is indeed a word from God pointing out the sins of the people (v. 23). Their greatest sin is the worship of false gods, the violation of the very core of their faith and identity: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Deuteronomy 5:7). A key instruction God instituted from the beginning was to cleanse the land God promised Israel from all idolatry. Isn't it interesting that a woman in that man's world authenticated the scroll, pointed out the center point of the nation's sin, and called the people to repent?

Verse 27 states "[Josiah's] heart was

penitent" and "he humbled himself before God" (v. 27). The king called the people together along with the elders, the priests, and Levites. He read aloud the book of the covenant, leading the people in a service of repentance and rededication. Josiah then commanded the removal of all the abominations, pagan idols, and altars (v. 33).

What a story! Tragically, Israel did not remain faithful and the downward cycle was repeated. But we cannot avoid our own weaknesses and mistakes by pointing back to "those people." While great leaders are certainly significant, a lasting spiritual transformation only happens when God's people choose to believe and live out their faith in the real world.

We call ourselves a Christian nation, yet our political pronouncements and treatment of the poor and strangers in our land is a blatant violation of both Old Testament commands and the teachings of Jesus.

The sacred writings of the Bible are not lost in the dusty back rooms of a temple; they are lost in the preferences of a selfish culture. What will it take for "God's people" to return to the grace and spiritual values Jesus taught and modeled? Repentance is not accomplished by government pronouncement or prophetic condemnation, but by the understanding that social change can only be real when the heart of the people is open to God.

Josiah was king in a time when even the prophetic voices were false. What are we hearing in our world? Our resource for godly values and daily living is in the varied history of Israel and the revolutionary example of Jesus. Who is listening? Repentance is not an easy choice for a people who see themselves as privileged. But if we can see beyond our own pride to our flawed thinking and sense of entitlement, there is a whole life of hope and blessing.

King Josiah experienced a renewed life of faith in God and led his people in the way of God, but sadly the reforms were not lasting and the ultimate result was exile. Faith in God must be real for each generation. What will be our choice?

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