

The Story of Manasseh

I. Top Down Failure – The King to his people

II. Top Down Forgiveness – The Lord to the King

Imagine the sight of a once renowned and powerful leader shackled and subdued by his enemies. A leader who was used to hearing shouts of praise and honor in the streets, now blasted with curses and taunts in a foreign land. A leader who once was paraded among servants, riches, and comforts, now dragged along with hooks and chains, like a caged animal. This was the story of the Manasseh, the once powerful king of Judah who was taken captive by the barbaric Assyrians, still known to this day in the pages of history for their acts of cruelty.

But, this was not the end, or the beginning, of Manasseh's story. It was actually in the middle. No one watching that day in the capitol city of the Assyria could have believed that Manasseh, of all the kings of Israel and Judah, would end up having the longest reign – 55 years, that's 15 years longer than King David. Likewise, no one could have imagined such a transformation in Manasseh's life. His story is really a masterpiece of God's grace and mercy. It is a tale of Top Down Failure in his early years, and Top Down Forgiveness in his latter days. We read a portion of Scripture that details this change, from 2 Chronicles 33:9-16:

So Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel. 10 And the LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen. 11 Therefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon. 12 Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, 13 and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God. 14 After this he built a wall outside the City of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate; and it enclosed Ophel, and he raised it to a very great height. Then he put military captains in all the fortified cities of Judah. 15 He took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem; and he cast them out of the city. 16 He also repaired the altar of the LORD, sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it, and commanded Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel.

Part 1: Top down failure

Our text begins by stating that Manasseh "seduced" the people he ruled over. Seduced is a fairly accurate translation of this Hebrew word, which can also mean to make someone drunk. Essentially, it involves an activity where a person's senses are dumbed down. In this case, Manasseh seduced the peoples' ability to detect spiritual danger. He dumbed down the defenses of their faith which God has re-instituted through Hezekiah, Manasseh's father.

One could point the blame to the people, of course, just as much as they could point at Manasseh. They should have known better. They should have corrected their king. Yet, the LORD looked directly at Manasseh because he was in the position of leadership. It was his responsibility, given from the LORD, to care for his people. The blame was shared by the entire nation but ultimately it rested on the king's shoulders. The last half of the first verse gives us an indication at how deteriorated things were. It says that Manasseh's lack of leadership had created a setting that was even more wicked

than the nations who inhabited Judea before the Israelites. It is surely a stunning indictment whenever believers become better at promoting and concealing sin than unbelievers. And the history of Manasseh's reign chronicles just exactly what the Lord was looking at.

What, exactly, had Manasseh done?

Well, regarding certain activities it is more appropriate to talk about what he *undid*. Verse 3 tells us that Manasseh re-established the high place altars to false gods. A bit of context helps to understand the significance of this. Manasseh's grandfather, Ahaz, had founded the high place altars, locations where God's people could worship besides the house of God. This sounds like a good decision and in a way, it was but quickly these high places also became worship locations for all sorts of heathen gods, alongside the true God. Judah had not completely forsaken the Lord, in theory, but they had dumbed down His Word and added idolatry to proper worship. The Lord clearly detested this activity and moved King Hezekiah to destroy the high place altars. Manasseh brought them back.

But, this was only the beginning. Chapter 33, along with the parallel account in 2 Kings 21, go on to tell us that Manasseh took idolatry to another level, building an actual altar to the Canaanite god, Asherah, in the Temple of Jehovah. What a blatant display of wickedness before the one, eternal, all-powerful God! Yet, all major sins begin as seemingly minor transgressions. Manasseh's allowance of religious mixture among the people was the direct cause of this overt idolatry in the very temple of Jerusalem.

Idolatry leads to wicked actions, and so Manasseh's failures continued. Verse 5 tells us that because of the influence of the false Canaanite gods, Manasseh was led to practice child-sacrifice, even with his own children. If the king was involved with this we can only imagine what the people did as they followed his example. 2 Kings explicitly records that Manasseh shed so much innocent blood that **"it filled Jerusalem from one end to another (2 Kings 21:16)."**

There was more that Manasseh did but this helps provide some context for our lesson today, especially why the Lord led him away to Assyria and the miracle of His grace to renew Manasseh after these sins. But, we should also ask ourselves, does Manasseh's story continue today? What are the "high places" in modern religious life? Do we take a clear stand against false religions and teachings, or are we trying to find a middle ground with them? Have we been seduced by the world's calls to join in togetherness with all walks of faith or do people clearly know that we stand with Christ alone? It may seem to reasonable to make allowances for other beliefs while continuing to worship the true God. But remember, this was the beginning of Manasseh's downfall, and something God warned against with His prophets. Our text says that the people didn't listen. Will we? This danger is upon the doorsteps of our hearts each day, especially for us who live in an ecumenical culture. We must remember that God calls us, who know His truth, to tear down the high place altars that oppose His will. Truly, in our Christian witness, this is the most loving thing we can do to someone who is led astray; not to help them feel comfortable in their idolatry.

One cannot help but sense the emotions that must have been going through Manasseh's heart as these events took place. Humility certainly was there but that was hardly all. He was denigrated as a leader. He lost everything. The Lord was judging him for failing to lead his people. At other times, the people would be judged.

Surely, Manasseh also felt anger. Who could blame him? Perhaps there was an inkling of anger at God. But, I think that most of all, Manasseh was mad at himself. Angry at the choices he had made.

Angry at the truths he ignored. Angry for all the wickedness he allowed and all the atrocities he committed. And this was proper. So often, with anger we immediately think that it must be sinful. But, the Bible clearly talks about a proper use of anger, a just anger as we typically call it. Paul wrote about this to the Ephesians: **Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another. 26 "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, 27 nor give place (foothold, opportunity, possibility) to the devil (Ephesians 4:25-27).**

Paul said there is a holy, sanctified anger in the face of sin. It's truly a thin line between this God-pleasing anger and the wrath that is produced by sinful thoughts. But, as difficult as it may be to put into practice, Paul's statement still stands, **"Be angry, but do not sin."** Part of reason for exercising this righteous anger is for what Paul warned about, the very thing Manasseh was faced with: **"Do not give place to the devil."**

Manasseh failed to exercise righteous anger at the spiritual nature of Israel, at least, before he was led to Assyria. The rest of the text tells us how after repenting, Manasseh did what he should have from the very beginning – protecting God's people from false religions and idolatry.

The question we ask is this: What would it take to arouse your righteous anger? Often, we hear these OT stories of how wicked things were and we think it must have been such a horrible, un-educated, brutish society. So much bloodshed that is covered the entire city. Idols erected in the Temple of all places. Child-sacrifice! It's easy to condemn at a distance just like it's easy to judge people today at a distance. But, perhaps one of the reasons the immorality of the time was so widely accepted was because it was presented so humanely – literally so in tune with human virtues. Sounds good, but once you see true humanity as the Bible describes it and as we experience it in life (greed, lust, hatred, extortion, etc.) something "humane" is not so virtuous. God calls it a seducement because that's exactly what it is. It doesn't feel bad. It doesn't look dangerous from afar. The lines between right and wrong tend to get blurred. People join in the evil because they are led astray. Their moral defenses are put down because it doesn't seem dangerous. It is a Trojan horse temptation from Satan.

Part 2: Top down forgiveness

Be angry but do not sin. Do not give occasion to the devil. That warning summarizes Manasseh's story. He learned the hard way, but he learned in the end. But, this was really much more than just a lesson in right and wrong. It was a transformation by God's grace. As wicked as Manasseh had been, as soon as he repented and again received God's grace and truth, he was forgiven. The same is true for our sins, even as they are at times very much the same as Manasseh's. The idea that some sins are not covered by Christ's blood comes from the same place as all other wickedness. It is just another high place altar that Satan would love to have you bow down to alongside of the truth. He wants you to think that the Bible is true in this way or that, but there are some evils that even God will never remit. And this is the worst lie of all because a Christian can grow and progress in their knowledge of God but as soon as forgiveness is doubted, nothing else that has been accomplished matters.

God's grace to Manasseh was unconditional. It had to be or it would count for nothing against the atrocities he committed. Here now, with Christ in view, the top-down failure of Judah's king, which seemed so large and obvious, was dwarfed in comparison to the top-down forgiveness. It is a lesson for our lives in terms of the correct path to follow but it also a stunning display of the very same hope

we possess by grace. Peter wrote in a similar way, warning: **“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.”** This is absolutely true, but let us not forget the context where immediately before Peter said this: **But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.**

The context of Manasseh’s life, of our lives, is exactly the same. Simple, clear warnings from God, yet given to sinners who often make mistakes and are seduced astray. But, in comparison to God’s renewal, top-down from the Father, to the Son, and given through the Spirit, sin and its effects are extinguished.

We return where we began. A king - dejected, defeated, humiliated. On display for all to see. This was the middle of Manasseh’s story, and the beginning of his renewal – it was the start of the greater half of the longest reign in this history of God’s people here on earth. But, only because a different King would come and suffer even worse. A greater King, who although he never led anyone astray, would likewise be paraded and persecuted through the streets of Jerusalem. Our eternal King, Jesus, who forgave all of our failures too. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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