

Heroes of the Faith: Josiah – Rediscovering the Word

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2 Kings 22:1-13, 23:1-3; John 14:15-17

*Living God,
help us so to hear your holy Word
that we may truly understand;
that, understanding, we may believe,
and, believing,
we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience,
seeking your honor and glory in all that we do;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

One of the worst kings in all of Israel was a man by the name of Manasseh. Famous for his wickedness, he refused to listen to the words of God's prophets and willfully led the people into great sin. The people erected images of pagan deities in the temple. Offerings were made to Baal and to the fertility goddess Asherah. Human sacrifices to the pagan god Molech were carried out and Manasseh sank so low as to sacrifice his own son in the fire. The people were turning to mediums and enchanters and fortune-tellers for guidance. Household gods and idols flourished. God's people were adrift in a sea of moral and spiritual confusion.

Thankfully, Manasseh was succeeded by Josiah, one of the best kings in all of Israel and therefore one of the great heroes of the faith. Eight years old when he ascended to the throne of Judah, Josiah had a heart for God, and he tried to do right. *"He did what was right in the sight of the Lord"* says the scripture, *"he walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left."*

During the early part of his reign he set out to rid the country of idols. Altars to the various gods were smashed to pieces. The corrupt priests were removed.

When he was twenty-six, Josiah turned his attention to the repair and reform of the temple in Jerusalem. We read:

^{2Ki 22:3} In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent the secretary, Shaphan son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, to the temple of the LORD. He said:

^{2Ki 22:4} "Go up to Hilkiah the high priest and have him get ready the money that has been brought into the temple of the LORD, which the doorkeepers have collected from the people.

^{2Ki 22:5} Have them entrust it to the men appointed to supervise the work on the temple. And have these men pay the workers who repair the temple of the LORD—

^{2Ki 22:6} the carpenters, the builders and the masons. Also have them purchase timber and dressed stone to repair the temple.

^{2Ki 22:7} But they need not account for the money entrusted to them, because they are acting faithfully."

^{2Ki 22:8} Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.

2Ki 22:9 Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: "Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple."

2Ki 22:10 Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

2Ki 22:11 When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.

2Ki 22:12 He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Acbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant:

2Ki 22:13 "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD'S anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us." [NIV]

As the temple was being repaired, an old dusty book was found by Hilkiah, the high priest. It was the Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses (*Deuteronomy or a copy of the first five books of the Old Testament known as the Penteteuch*). Its message had gone unheard by the people for decades. When the Mosaic book of the Law was brought to King Josiah and he heard the words of the book, he realized that the people had drastically deviated from God's plan. They had been a people building without a blueprint. Josiah had the people gather at the temple to hear the words of the book that had been found on a dusty shelf.

2Ki 23:1 Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem.

2Ki 23:2 He went up to the temple of the LORD with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD.

2Ki 23:3 The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—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. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant. [NIV}

The result was a flowering of Israel's faith, the beginning of true renewal in people's hearts. They were listening to God's voice again. People turned from dead institutionalism to the living God!

Whenever God's Word is rediscovered and its truths applied, spiritual renewal is the result. So it has happened throughout church history. Martin Luther discovered the lost book out of a sense of frustration with the tired, shifting traditions of the church. He heard God speak to him afresh in the book of Romans. His "scripture alone" belief fueled the fires of the Reformation. Luther translated the Bible into the common language of the masses, inspiring both the Protestant and Catholic reformations.

It was a rediscovery of the power of the Word that led to the first and second great awakenings in America – a time of great spiritual revival and movement towards social justice. It was a rediscovery of the Word that caused many to lead the way in the abolition of slavery.

Perhaps there will be another spiritual revival on American soil as people rediscover the wisdom and the power of God's Word. It happened before and it can happen again. We can pray that that will be so.

The fact is, most Americans possess a Bible – 92% of them do. In fact, the average household possesses three. But people just don't read it. Sadly, that's true of many church people. The rate of biblical illiteracy is pretty high, even among those who have grown up in the church. The book is "lost" to many members. It's been hidden away on some dusty shelf.

George Lindbeck, the famous Yale theologian, has commented on the decreasing knowledge of scripture from a professor's perspective: *"When I first arrived at Yale, even those who came from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than most of those now who come from churchgoing families."* That's a sad commentary!

I don't think I am making an overstatement when I say that one of the greatest needs in the Christian church today is for its members to rediscover the authority, the power, and the beauty of the Word.

One of the most exciting and fulfilling moments for me as a pastor is to see people get excited about the Bible. Suddenly, they find God speaking to them through the Bible like never before. The Word of God comes alive. The words begin to jump off the page, and they experience a genuine, spiritual breakthrough. New meaning, new purpose, new direction and new joy comes flooding into life. It's a joy to behold.

What is it that makes the Word of God so powerful and transformative? It is none other than the Spirit of God. Without the illuminating, energizing Spirit of God, the words of the Bible are basically just dead words on a page. But when the words are joined with the Spirit, they pop off the page and drop into our hearts; we are inspired, much like an incredible passage of music inspires us. We are motivated to take action, to change, to head in a different direction. What's more, the Spirit empowers us to do what is asked of us. Ultimately, we don't change ourselves; he does, for He lives in us!

Here's a formula to remember: Word + Spirit = Power.

Word and Spirit work together. When we take the Bible seriously and read with an open mind and open heart, or when we listen carefully to the preaching of the Word and invoke the Spirit's presence, the Spirit joins our spirit and we are spiritually fed by God; we are instructed by him and we are empowered by him to do what is written.

All this was promised by Jesus himself who said: *"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever-the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and with you and will be in you."* [NIV]

We need never read the Bible alone; we need never be left to our own understanding. The Spirit of Truth promises to come alongside us. Are we aware of His presence?

Could it be that some of the dullness and boredom and powerlessness of present-day western Christianity is due not only to lack of biblical knowledge, but to a lack of expectation that the Spirit of God will actually show up and speak to us through the words on the page?

Christians in the Pentecostal churches have something to teach us in this regard. One well-known Pentecostal leader, David du Plessis, reminds us that the Holy Spirit is central to our life in the church. He once said:

The church has been a repository for two thousand years of the most incredible truth in the world, truth about man's need and God's love and grace. The church has kept this truth in the deep freeze as you would a steak. Now if you offer that frozen steak to a hungry person, it's of no practical use to him or her. But if you put that steak on the grill with a fire under it, suddenly the fat starts to sizzle, the juices begin to run, and you begin to smell the aroma of the roasting meat. That steak becomes negotiable to the hungry party. The Holy Spirit is the vehicle by which the fire is lit under old truths so that even non-believers are attracted. [qtd. Bruce Larson, *Wind and Fire*, p. 37]

We might say the Holy Spirit is the fire – the “sizzle” that makes the words of scripture deeply personal and energizing. The Holy Spirit is present wherever people are truly excited about the word and are actively living out. There is a distinctive “aroma” that is quite captivating.

On the other hand, we've all been to churches where there is no aroma - or at least no pleasant one. Perhaps they have lost all expectation that the Holy Spirit will show up. The Bible may be for them an ancient book that no longer really applies. They essentially believe God has stopped speaking. Their faith does indeed become a dull thing; there is no “sizzle and pop.” Faith is loved out of a sense of duty or out of faithfulness to tradition, but there is no personal encounter with the Holy One.

My greatest wish for all of you, as your pastor, is that you rediscover the authority, the power, and the beauty of God's word and that your relationship with God will become deeply personal and transformative. If you haven't done so, take your Bible off the shelf and give it a fair hearing. If you have never really read the Book – now is the time to pick it up and read.

If you are already a student of the Word, then I ask you to recommit yourself to reading and studying with a view to living it out. Above all, expect the Holy Spirit to show up.

Before the reading or hearing of the Word, I commend to you the practice of praying what is called “A prayer of illumination.” We should always ask the Spirit of God to illuminate the words on the page, so that we might understand them and take them to heart. We are to invoke his presence, praying like this:

*Lord, open my heart and mind
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that as the scriptures are read
and your Word is proclaimed,
I may hear with joy what you say to me today. Amen.*

I, along with probably all my fellow pastors, suffer from a common malady: "Preacher's Block." The deadline for the sermon is fast approaching. You have a topic and a text. And you sit at your laptop before an empty screen with nothing but a blinking cursor. It's a frightening thing – you are not even sure you can get started. When that happens to me, I begin to stew, until I finally figure out that maybe I better pray: "Lord, teach me by your Spirit ... Give me *your* words to say." And the Lord invariably answers that prayer, the creative juices begin to flow and I get in the "zone."

Invoking the presence of the Spirit makes all the difference in the world. The Word of God comes alive! May the Spirit of God make the word of God come alive for *you!*

My prayer for you is that you will rediscover the Word, as Josiah did, and that you will be inspired and transformed by the experience.

*Come, Holy Spirit, teach us afresh from your Holy Word
And fill us with your power. Amen.*