

Josiah: Judah's Last Good King

An Untimely Death?

Text:

II Chronicles 35:20-27

After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Neco king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out to meet him. But he sent envoys to him, saying, "What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you." Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo. And the archers shot King Josiah. And the king said to his servants, "Take me away, for I am badly wounded." So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel; behold, they are written in the Laments. Now the rest of the acts of Josiah, and his good deeds according to what is written in the Law of the LORD, and his acts, first and last, behold, they are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah.

Introduction:

Even though the biblical account of the life of King Josiah is relatively lengthy, it is also very selective. It focuses on his spiritual and religious achievements while hardly mentioning his political acts. It also focuses on the first eighteen years of his reign and is silent about the last thirteen with the exception of the passage we are presently considering-- the account of his death. From archaeology and Babylonian records we can fill in some of the gaps.

Josiah's reign was not only a time of spiritual renewal and revival; it was also the last period of greatness in the history of Judah. Josiah took advantage of the decline of Assyria, who had conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel and had almost conquered Judah a century earlier, to renew the kingdom of the House of David in all of Palestine. This is the reason he is as far

North as Megiddo, the city that guards the pass through the Carmel range on the major highway leading from Egypt to Syria, Babylon, and Assyria.

Assyria was on the decline and Babylon was on the rise. They would soon dominate the Fertile Crescent and eventually take Judah into captivity. To slow this advance Assyria had allied with their ancient enemy Egypt. They were mounting a last ditch effort in the city of Carchemish on the northern end of the Euphrates River to the west of Haran, ancient city of Terah and Abraham. They were hoping to break the Babylonian siege of Haran and stop the progress of the Babylonians. Necco, King of Egypt, was moving an army up the coastal highway to Carchemish to join the Assyrian army in the effort.

For a reason that is not given in the text, Josiah takes his army to the mountain pass at Megiddo to cut him off, and to prevent him from joining the Assyrian forces. Most likely he had made an alliance with the Babylonians against the Assyrians. In so doing, Josiah is killed in battle, taken back to Jerusalem where he is greatly mourned and buried with highest honor. As we read the account in II Kings this is about all that we can say. Based on its account the headline of the Jerusalem Post of a certain day in 609 B.C. (we only know the year) might have read: "Judah's Greatest King since David Dead in Battle, Whole Country Grieves". II Chronicles from which we have read the account, however, adds some details to the account which cause us to ask questions about the death of Josiah, which we often ask in relation to our own lives and deaths. Hence, it is worth our time to pause and reflect on Josiah's death.

The details I am referring to are found in verses 21-22: "But he (Necco) sent envoys to him, saying, "What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you." Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo."

Two questions arise from these verses that we all reflect upon at times:

- Was God really speaking to Josiah through the pagan Egyptian King Necco? Did Josiah fail to hear and understand what God was saying?
- Was Josiah's death unnecessary and untimely?

Before addressing these questions allow me to say that opinion is divided. Going back as far as post-captivity Judah, the Targums indicate that it was not the true God who was speaking through Necco, but an idol, and that Josiah had good and valid reasons for attacking Necco, and his death was not due to his disobedience to the will of God. This has been the opinion and interpretation of many since that time. Others, on the other hand, have seen in a

straightforward reading of the text of II Chronicles the opposite. Josiah, good and wise king that he was, on this occasion failed to discern the voice of God; acted rashly, and died before he needed to.

I'm not sure that we can fully resolve the question to everyone's satisfaction. In fact, my purpose is not so much to resolve it as to reflect upon it. What motivates us to do this is not an idle interest in an historic detail of an event that happened 2,600 years ago, but our own lives and deaths. Can we die before our time? Can we fail to understand and do God's will? These are the questions I want us to reflect on.

I. Can We Die Before our Time?

This is a question that all of us have discussed at one time or another. Common answers are: "When it's your time, it's your time", or "When your number's up, it's up". We have all heard them, and some of us have used them. My observation is that such reasoning is used for at least three reasons, one completely fallacious, one understandable if not altogether right, and one right. First we use it to justify unreasonable behavior. For example, you have probably either used this reasoning or heard someone else using it to justify not wearing seatbelts. To simply point out the illogic of such reasoning let me simply say that while you might use such reasoning for not wearing your seatbelt or texting while you drive, you would not use it to justify driving with no hands or taking a nap at the wheel. A calculated risk is a calculated risk, but if you really believe that your actions have no relationship to the length of your life, which is, in the end, pure fatalism, then why look before you cross the street, vaccinate your children, inspect your brakes, or perform any one of hundreds of simple acts that we perform constantly to keep ourselves alive.

A second, and more profound reason for employing such reasoning, is the reason why some have employed it in the case of Josiah, to deal with our grief when we are facing either our own untimely death, or the untimely death of a loved one. Josiah died young. He was only thirty-nine years old. He died at the height of his reign, beloved of his people. The whole nation grieved. We can understand why some would say: "why did God let him die?" All of us, at one time or another have asked this question. Sometimes it is easier to simply believe that the person died, because in the wisdom of God it was time for them to go, than to believe that human failure, folly, or wrongdoing contributed to their death.

The third reason is the most valid. When our acts are motivated by faith; faith overcomes fear and enables us to do that which we are convinced God is calling us to do in spite of risk. How many great things that have been done in this world that would not have been done if fear had

not been overcome by faith, and men and women had not taken death-defying risks. We should also point out that sometimes this faith was rewarded by deliverance from death and sometimes it wasn't but in all cases where it was a genuine act of faith, God was not absent in the outcome. This is the great lesson of Hebrews 11:32-40

“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated-- of whom the world was not worthy--wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

Notice that the passage is equally divided between two groups of people: those who performed daring deeds of faith and were miraculously delivered, and those who acted equally in faith and died. The “others” at the beginning of verse thirty six is a key word. God makes no distinction between the two. Both acted equally in faith, and God was equally involved in the outcome of their acts. Sometimes it is God's will that our lives be spared, sometimes it is not. So when we act in faith knowing that we are doing the will of God we have nothing to fear. We may rightfully reassure ourselves that our lives are in God's hands and he has promised to be with us to the end.

II. Can We Fail to Hear God's Voice?

So in the end, it is the first question which we have taken in second place that is the most important. If, indeed Josiah was acting in faith, having truly discerned that it was God's will to attack Necco, then he is to be included in the “others” of Hebrews 11:6. If, on the other hand, the text means exactly what it says, when it says: “He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God”, then we can say that even though he was a good and wise king who did much good, because of a rash act; because he did not listen to what God was saying he died before his time. Both are genuine possibilities.

There is one further detail in the story that bears pointing out. Just before we are told that Josiah did not listen to what God was saying to him we are told that he disguised himself in order to fight with him. The word that is translated “disguised” means that, but it also means to “change oneself” to “act out of character”. Is this what happens to Josiah? Does he, in a rash moment, after a career of listening to God act out of character? We may never be able to fully answer the question, but the question, itself, stands as a reminder and a warning. The one safe place on this earth is within the will of God. If we are anywhere else, we are in danger.