

Josiah: Judah's Last Good King

Part III: Tearing down Idols

Text: II Kings 34:1-8

Josiah *was* eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem one and thirty years. And he did *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined *neither* to the right hand, nor to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father: and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images. And they brake down the altars of Baalim in his presence; and the images, that *were* on high above them, he cut down; and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images, he brake in pieces, and made dust *of them*, and strowed *it* upon the graves of them that had sacrificed unto them. And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And *so did he* in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about. And when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem. Now in the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land, and the house, he sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and Joah the son of Joahaz the recorder, to repair the house of the LORD his God.

Introduction:

Everything in verses 4-7 of this text prepares the way for verse 8. Josiah's goal was to repair the temple, God's special dwelling place; the place where Israel came to meet with and worship God. But before the true worship of God could be restored the worship of false gods had to cease; before God's temple could reclaim its rightful place among the people, the high places of Baal and the groves of the Asherim had to be destroyed. II Kings 23 gives us a much more detailed account of Josiah's idol purge demonstrating the extent to which the worship of the gods of the Canaanites had infiltrated every nook and cranny of Judean life. In fact according II Kings 23: 4-6 his purge began with the Temple itself:

And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the keepers of the threshold to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven. He burned them outside Jerusalem

in the fields of the Kidron and carried their ashes to Bethel. And he deposed the priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem; those also who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and the moon and the constellations and all the host of the heavens. And he brought out the Asherah from the house of the LORD, outside Jerusalem, to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron and beat it to dust and cast the dust of it upon the graves of the common people.

This account teaches us something that we must all learn if we are to truly worship and serve the living God. God seeks whole-hearted worshippers. He will not share his temple with idols. Before we can make our hearts a sanctuary for God, we must first rid them of all idols. The first and second commandments go together. For God to be God there must be no other god. We cannot break the second commandment and keep the first, and in order to keep the first we must first make sure that we are keeping the second.

This principle is found all through the Scriptures. We can give as a first example the prophet Jeremiah whose ministry begins one year after the events we are discussing in the 13th year of King Josiah. When God called Jeremiah he told him that he had set him over the nations “to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” As you read the book of Jeremiah this theme is developed. Although Judah would have a short revival under Josiah, it would not last. They would be plucked up and taken to Babylon. It would take seventy years of captivity to cure them of their idolatry. But it was necessary. If God is to be served and worshipped, the idols must go.

A second example is found in II Corinthians 10:3-5 where the Apostle Paul writes: “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” Paul, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, knew that before Christ could reign in the lives of the Gentile believers the power of idolatry had to be broken. Jesus had said: “no one can serve two masters.” Conversion for Paul was “to turn from idols to serve the true and living God” (I Thessalonians 1:9). For Paul we must “flee idolatry” (I Corinthians 10:14).

We must not make the mistake of thinking that idolatry was only a problem for the ancients. We may not worship Baal and Asherah, but that does not mean that we have no idols. Fallen man is by nature an idolater. Having rejected the true and living God, we are always finding things to replace him. Some do it with money, some with power, some with ideologies, some with relationships, and others with their own ego, but all, unless they consciously seek to worship God, will find an idol to fill his place.

So those of us who desire to make our hearts a sanctuary for God must first remove and destroy those idols which have usurped his place. Josiah has some things to teach us about how to do this. What can we learn from him about destroying idols?

I. The motive for destroying idols is to build a temple

The tearing down of idols is not an end in itself. It is a necessary prerequisite to building a temple. A temple is a place for God to dwell. We rid our hearts of idols not because we wish to be free of idols, but because we want to know God. Idols can be hard taskmasters, and sometimes we want to be rid of them because they have made our lives miserable. This may motivate us to get rid of the idol, but it won't be sufficient motivation to restore the temple. Josiah wanted the blessing of God. He wanted God to be supreme. He truly longed and prayed that his kingdom might come and that his will might be done, but he knew that as long as the temple was polluted with the paraphernalia of Baal his prayers would be in vain. He tore down, not for the joy of tearing down, but in order that something good and beautiful might be built to replace that which had brought degradation and demise to his people. When we catch a glimpse of the beauty of the Lord and the beauty of a life lived in his presence, and our hearts are filled with a desire to know him and to experience the blessing of his presence and the beauty and order that he brings to our lives it is no more difficult to tear the idols from our heart than it is to raze a shanty so we can construct a palace.

On the other hand if we are focused on the idol we will always find some reason to keep them a little longer. Like the twenty year old pair of shoes in the back of our closet we will find some lame excuse not to put them where they need to be – in the trash.

II. The destruction needs to be complete

What sets Josiah apart from even the other good kings of Judah is the thoroughness of his reforms. For example we read in II Kings 12: 2-6 of Jehoash:

And Jehoash did *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him. But the high places were not taken away: the people still sacrificed and burnt incense in the high places. And Jehoash said to the priests, All the money of the dedicated things that is brought into the house of the LORD, *even* the money of every one that passeth *the account*, the money that every man is set at, *and* all the money that cometh into any man's heart to bring into the house of the LORD, Let the priests take *it* to them, every man of his acquaintance: and let them repair the

breaches of the house, wheresoever any breach shall be found. But it was *so, that* in the three and twentieth year of king Jehoash the priests had not repaired the breaches of the house.

The refrain of verse 4: “But the high places were not taken away: the people still sacrificed and burnt incense in the high places” is repeated numerous times in the records of the kings of Judah. While the king, himself, turned his heart towards God and sought to follow him, he did not rid the land of idols, so the people continued worshipping them. As we see in the case of Jehoash even though he ordered that money be collected for the restoration of the temple, the temple was never restored. No temple will be build so long as the idols remain in place. Josiah’s measures may seem extreme, but he had learned from history. Half-hearted reforms don’t work. When the temple and the land had been completely purged of its high places and idols then the people had a heart to restore them temple.

III. The destruction needs to be public and definitive

When you read the long account of the extreme measures that Josiah took in II Kings 23 you might think that he was excessive. After all, isn’t digging up the bones of priests long dead, grinding them and sprinkling them over the desecrated high places going too far. Josiah understood something that all those who have been able to build true temples for God know; the break with the past must be definitive and public. Like Paul in Ephesus who created a very expensive bonfire out of the rare and exquisite books of magic of the Ephesian Christians, Josiah understood the power of a public act of renunciation, a clean break with the past demonstrating genuine repentance and conversion.

We may be slow to recognize idols as idols, but once we do we need to renounce them and destroy them. When we have done this then we will have a proper building site for a true temple, a dwelling place for the true and living God who shares his glory with no other.