

Josiah: Judah's Last Good King

Part II: Discovering God's Word

Text:

Deuteronomy 31:24-29

When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, "Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you. For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death! Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands."

II Kings 22:3-13

And it came to pass in the eighteenth year of king Josiah, *that* the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of the LORD, saying, Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may sum the silver which is brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the door have gathered of the people: And let them deliver it into the hand of the doers of the work, that have the oversight of the house of the LORD: and let them give it to the doers of the work which *is* in the house of the LORD, to repair the breaches of the house, Unto carpenters, and builders, and masons, and to buy timber and hewn stone to repair the house. Howbeit there was no reckoning made with them of the money that was delivered into their hand, because they dealt faithfully. And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the LORD. And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the

scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying, Go ye, enquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great *is* the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.

Introduction:

Approximately eight hundred years separate the two texts which we have read. The first comes from the end of Deuteronomy, the last will and testament of Moses. This is the last instruction he gives to Israel. The Levities are to take the book of the law which he has now committed to writing and to place it beside the Ark of the Covenant as a testimony against Israel. The ark represented the covenant that He had made with them, and the book contained the conditions of the covenant. The Levities in charge of the Ark were to make sure that the two always stayed together.

The text we have read from II Kings recounts an incident that occurred in the 18th year of the reign of King Josiah whose life we are presently examining. Remember that in the text we looked at last week he was described as one who “did *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (II Kings 22:3). II King 23:25 sums up his life by saying: “And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there *any* like him”. Here is a king whole hearted in his devotion to God and to his law. The expression, “turned not aside to the right hand or to the left”, comes from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses used it to describe the whole-hearted devotion that God desired. In chapter 17 verses 10-11 he exhorts the people: “Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the LORD will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left.”

So Josiah is not only Judah's last good king, he is, according to the testimony of Scripture, of all the kings of Israel and Judah the most whole-hearted in his devotion and obedience to God. Here is a king whose one supreme desire was to do the will of the God who had made him king. This incident, taken from the eighteenth year of his reign, demonstrates beautifully the heart of Josiah. The temple had fallen into disrepair. Since the days of Hezekiah it had received little attention. The people were more attracted by the high places of Baal than by Mount Zion's Temple. Hence, the place where God had made his name to dwell had become a shambles, a

nesting place for pigeons more than a place of worship for God's people. Josiah, now a man, and in full command of the country, sends his Secretary of State, Shaphan, to Hilkiah, the High Priest, to tell him to take the money that the Levites had been collecting and to use it for its intended purpose. They are to take it and hire trusted and competent workers to restore the Temple to its full glory so that God might be worshipped in a proper and fitting manner.

Hilkiah, perhaps as he is laying out the work for the workmen, makes a discovery that he then shares with Shaphan, who then brings it to the attention of the King. He discovers the Book of the Law. We are not told where he discovered it, other than in the Temple, but perhaps it was right there where Moses had told them to keep it-- next to the Ark of the Covenant. The most amazing element of the story is that the High Priest of Judah was ignorant of its existence. The religious leader of the nation was not even aware of its most precious spiritual possession. The Scriptures, God's communication to his people, had been lost-- lost to the people, but not lost to God. While it is not the main point of what I want to say, it is worth mentioning that this teaches us something about what we refer to as the preservation of the Scriptures. Not only has God given us his Word, but he has preserved it through the ages so that we might have it today. The story of that preservation from the time of Moses to the present is an exciting story that fills more than one volume. Every time you hold the Bible in your hands and read it you should give thanks to the God who gave it to you, not only for its existence, but also for its preservation. The image that we are given in the present text is of a single copy of the Torah moldering in a derelict Temple, forgotten and unread, perhaps covered with dust and bird droppings, until Hilkiah notices it and brings it to the attention of Shaphan, who in turns brings it to King Josiah.

With that picture in mind I want us to meditate on the Scriptures lost and found.

I. Losing God's Word

This story demonstrates a persistent fact of history past and present. The Scriptures may be lost even though they are physically close to us. How many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem had daily walked within a few feet of the most precious book in the world totally unaware of its very existence. Yet they are little different from many of our fellow citizens. There has never been a moment in the history of the world when the Scriptures were more available than the present. For those who have eyes to see them they are ubiquitous. There are print Bibles, audio Bibles and online Bibles, yet millions in America are almost entirely ignorant of the Bible's existence and contents. Statistics indicate that as a nation we are more biblically ignorant that we have ever been. Why? How have we managed to lose God's Word while perched on top of a mountain of Bibles? The full answer to that question is complex and cannot be fully given in

one sermon, but the most essential part of the answer, no doubt, lies in the value that we attribute to it.

Like ancient Judah we are so enamored with our own high places of Baal that we attribute little value to the Eternal Word of God. Jeremiah, who was already alive in the reign of Josiah, described the folly of Judah in the following words: “For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, *and* hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13). We too have forsaken the “living waters” for “broken cisterns”, and the greatest tragedy is that having not been satisfied by the fetid water offered up by a corrupt, self-centered culture. We have too often forgotten that the living water exists. So we continue poisoning ourselves with the empty remedies of a hollow culture while streams of living water flow beside us.

II. Finding God’s Word

The book of the law was found right where it had always been, right where Moses had told them to put it when he had first given it to them. Once Hilkiah found it all he had to do was dust it off and read it. Once he did, and it was brought to the attention of Josiah, good things began to happen; revival broke out, and the country was spared for a time. We live in a culture that loves novelty. Like the Athenians of the first century, we spend our time looking for “some new thing”, always thinking that the next new thing will be *the* thing. Yet we always come away unsatisfied. While we drink contaminated water from broken cisterns, we are dying for the life giving water of God’s Word. How do we find it? We find it the same way Hilkiah and Josiah found it. We find it by going to that place where it has always been, to the sixty six books of inspired canonical Scriptures. We find it when we swallow our pride, admit our failure, and take up the book that made our culture what it was when it was at its best. We find it when we begin to read the book that our spiritual ancestors were willing to die for. We find it when we turn away from the polluted cisterns of a corrupt culture and drink deeply from the living water poured out upon this parched earth by the Eternal God. Isaiah understood what I am saying and visualized it beautifully in the fifty-fifth chapter of his prophecies where he issues this invitation:

Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain cometh down, and the

snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap *their hands*" (Isaiah 55:6-12).