

Our Last Hope: Josiah

Lenten Midweek #6 – 03/29/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: 2 Chronicles 34:1-3; 35:20-27 Past. Keith Besel

Introduction

- ⌘ On this is, our final Lenten midweek service, we turn our attention to King Josiah, the last of the “good” kings of Judah. We’re skipping five kings ahead in the lineage from last week’s king, Uzziah, because Hezekiah fits best with the theme for Maundy Thursday, next week.
 - ➔ As for Josiah, let’s set the stage for his coronation at 8-years-old. For the last 57 years, Judah has suffered under two of the worst kings she ever had. The first was Manasseh. 2 Chronicles 33:9 tells us that “Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.” He reigned 55 years and was then succeeded by his son Amon for two years until he was assassinated by his own servants because of his great evil.
- ⌘ As Amon’s son Josiah became king those 57 years of worshiping idols had weakened the kingdom of Judah and taken its toll. Imagine if, since 1966 our nation had been led by extreme persecutors of Christianity. The faithful remnant remained, but it was weak. It had been several generations since there was any regular celebration of festivals or teaching of Torah. Now the people were accustomed to worshiping the Baals and Asheroth idols. Yahweh’s temple was again in disrepair as always comes with long periods of unfaithful worship and practice.

I. Judah’s Last Hope.

- ⌘ Now as the 8-year-old Josiah begins his reign verse two tells us that “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father”. Even as a boy of 16, he sought the God of David, in spite of his reign beginning in the chaos of an assassination with foreign enemies on every side.
 - ➔ The question that loomed over this young king was whether or not he could stave off the destruction of Judah and lead God’s people back into glory? On the surface it seemed as though Josiah was Judah’s last hope.

II. Josiah died opposing God’s Word.

- ⌘ When he was 26, Josiah began to repair the house of the LORD, as his faithful ancestors had done before him. While the carpenters and builders were working – amidst all the clutter, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law, the Torah of Moses. This book was more precious than all the money and gold that was found in the temple. So, it was brought to King Josiah.
 - ➔ Then as the king’s secretary read God’s Word to him, Josiah realized what it was and tore his clothes in repentance and humility because he said, “our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do according to all that is written in this book” (34:21).
- ⌘ Now that the people of Judah had been reminded of both the great promises and curses of God’s covenant with Moses, there was a great renewal of faith among all the people. They repented of their sin and turned away from worshipping idols.
 - ➔ Josiah renewed the covenant as he kept a Passover in Jerusalem. Chapter 35:18 says that “no Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet”, some 500 years earlier. Even so, hanging over the reign of King Josiah was the word of the prophetess Huldah. She had prophesied impending disaster and judgement for all of Judah’s previous evil, except that because of Josiah’s faithfulness, God said He would not bring His wrath until after the king’s death.

⊗ Then it happened that the king was confronted with a dicey problem. Neco, the Pharaoh of Egypt was marching his army north through Judah in order to fight further north at the Euphrates River, probably against the ever-expanding Kingdom of Babylon. We don't know exactly why Josiah opposed this, but there are a number of possible reasons. And let's state the obvious; it's got to be unsettling for any king to have foreign troops, looking for war and traveling through your land.

→ Whatever the reason, Josiah was bothered and went out with his own army to meet Neco. Remember, Neco did not intend to fight Judah. He was headed north to fight at Carchemish. In fact, the text indicates that Neco apparently was commanded by God to pursue this mission. He told Josiah in chapter 35:21, "Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest He destroy you." And the next verse actually tells us that, yes, this foreign king spoke these words "from the mouth of God" (35:22).

⊗ Nevertheless, King Josiah couldn't resist getting in the middle of this international conflict. He was stubbornly determined to fight. And in doing this Josiah ended up, blatantly opposed to God's Word, albeit a word in which God used the unbelieving Egyptian Pharaoh to proclaim it.

→ It sure looks like Josiah knew he was doing wrong, because instead of calling on God to lead him and his forces against Neco's army, 35:22 says that he disguised himself as an opposing soldier just so he could fight against Egypt without being public about it. But of course King Josiah was not disguised from God, and what was likely an arrow shot from the long-range archers found him with what would be a deadly blow.

→ Luther comments on this by saying, "This is intended to make you (and me) realize that it is impossible to govern an earthly commonwealth without sin" (AE 12:240). And I might add; it is impossible to go against God's perfect will without receiving God's consequences that come with such a sin. In the end, Neco's warning from God was fulfilled as King Josiah was destroyed there in the valley of Megiddo.

⊗ Thus the last hope of Judah was dashed with the king's death in an unnecessary war. Josiah's son, Jehoahaz reigned in his place for only three months until the Egyptians installed a puppet king. Not long after that Babylon invaded from the north and set up puppet kings of its own. One thing led to another, and in 587 BC Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, fulfilling the prophecies that God's chosen people would be taken into exile.

III. What hope when a good king dies?

⊗ So it is that Josiah's death raised many questions regarding the future of the kingdom of Judah. But one thing was clear; Judah would never be the same. The old days were gone, and foreigners would now have the upper hand in the land of David. Josiah's death brought a time of weeping and lamentation for a good king who was killed sooner than was necessary.

→ Little did they know at the time that their weeping would continue for at least 200 years.

⊗ In spite of his poor judgment with Neco, King Josiah was a good king – truly a great king. And we learn from his life that even his righteous repentance and sacrifices could not stop the kingdom from being destroyed. So it is that any earthly king, even a "good" earthly king can only hope, at best, to give his people peace no longer than he is himself alive on this earth. And try as he might, even a great earthly king has no control over the next generation; no ability to keep the kingdom from destruction.

IV. Jesus died fulfilling God's Word

⊗ That's the pattern of this life – one generation follows another. So it was in the history of generations after Josiah, that His descendant, Jesus came to a wicked and sinful generation.

As Jesus taught, with His coming, the Kingdom of God was now at hand, but there was much opposition to it. Those who were faithful had been prepared by the prophet John. He called God's people to repentance in the Judean wilderness by the Jordan River. And it is there as the Word of God made flesh that the Son of God brought the Torah and Prophets out into the open once again; teaching in the temple, synagogues, and countryside.

→ And just as God's Word predicted it, Jesus, the Son of David suffered. He often taught that the Son of Man must suffer and die and be raised again. And so He willingly entered Jerusalem even when He knew it meant His certain death. But this was no secret that only He could know by divine foreknowledge. Even His disciples knew that the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees had been eager to stone Jesus for months. So Jesus wasn't riding that donkey on Palm Sunday to His coronation but to His assassination instead!

✘ Yet Jesus would not be deterred. He made no effort to disguise Himself as Josiah had done. He entered Jerusalem, taught in and cleansed the temple in plain view of the enemy. He confronted the false teachers that opposed God's Word while they were the ones who sought the cover of darkness to come out against Him; hoping to hide their evil deeds. And once the chief priests had Jesus in custody; then they stripped the Son of God bare and hung Him under the sign that read, "This is the King of the Jews."

→ As the crowds called for His blood, the faithful women wept and lamented, as St. Luke recorded it in Scripture. While His body lay behind the stone, in the tomb great fear gripped this would-be king's followers. He had been their "last hope" for the redemption of Israel. But now He was dead. To them, the future was bleak indeed. And just as their Lord had told them it happen, 40 years later the earthly kingdom was destroyed, as the Romans attacked and leveled the temple to the ground, making the nation no more than a relic of past glory once again.

V. Yet Jesus truly is Israel's last hope.

✘ Yes, Israel's "last hope" hung dying on a cross; not shot accidentally by archers, but intentionally nailed to the tree. The sign, dictated by an unbelieving governor, truthfully proclaimed what the peoples' hearts refused to believe: that Jesus is the King of the Jews – all while the world rejoiced at an innocent man's brutal death. Those wicked and violent men blatantly opposed God's Word, taking the kingdom by force, while His followers wept and lamented.

✘ But this was not the end, was it? For the ultimate Son of Josiah has turned our mourning into great joy. What Jesus knew, that even His faithful followers struggled to believe, was that the way to an eternal kingdom had only one path – through the cross. Only by His suffering and death could death be overcome. Now with our sins forgiven, we can follow our Savior into life, where weeping is no more and our song is the same as the angels before His eternal throne, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. ...To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:12, 13).

→ Yes, the reign of this Son of David was incredibly short by earthly standards; cut short by a gruesome death. But there would be no successor, because Jesus is the only king to succeed Himself at death. So we no longer mourn King Josiah or the destruction of the temple or Jerusalem, whether the first or second time, for our King lives eternally, and in His kingdom we see Him now in the fullness of His Godly power and glory.

✘ So now, toward the end of Lent, when we turn to the cross, our sorrow as we see Him die for our forgiveness, is soon turned to joy next week when we celebrate His resurrection for our eternal victory. As Jesus said in John 16:24, when He sees you again in the flesh, "No one will take your joy from you." To Him be all the glory. Amen.