

2ND KINGS

Week 36, chapter 23

2nd Kings Chapter 23 is one of those chapters in the bible that is so chocked full of historical information and divine principles and applications that it takes awhile to untangle it and address it all. I think the time we spend here will be well worth it for you.

The chapter opens with an impressive ceremony at the Temple in Jerusalem, instigated by King Josiah, which no doubt was meant to be patterned after ones he had only recently heard about when the rediscovered Torah scroll was read to him. The first ceremonial convocation was held at Mt. Sinai when the Torah of God was first received by Moses. And then another one later in the mountains of Moab as Moses prepared to turn Israel over to Joshua who would lead the Hebrews across the Jordan and into the Promised Land. And shortly thereafter at Gilgal where a circumcision ceremony was held, and then later still at an elaborate ceremony split between Mts. Ebal and Gerizim in Canaan where the curses and the blessings of the Law of Moses were read to all Israel.

In each one of these the original covenant given to Moses was either ratified by a new generation, or was re-dedicated by Israelites who were in need of being reminded of just who their great God was and what He required of His people. However being present at a lavish and highly emotionally charged religious ceremony, even mouthing agreement in unison with the leader and ones' peers who are present, does not necessarily indicate the worshipper's actual inner spiritual condition. The sad reality was that while King **Yoshiyahu** (Josiah) was doing all he reasonably could to drive his people back to the Lord (even knowing from Hulda's prophecy that Judah was doomed); this nationwide revival movement was fueled by **his** zeal, not theirs.

Last week we read Jeremiah chapter 2 that gave us God's perspective of the true spiritual condition of the people of Judah, and it was stunningly awful to the say the least. And hopefully the sum of what we have learned in our study of the two Books of Kings leads us to understand that a spiritual decline is a slow process, which advances in seemingly harmless baby steps that none but the most spiritually aware even notice. In but a relatively few pages of Holy Scripture we have journeyed from the high highs of the glory days of faithful King David, to the low lows of idolatrous King Manasseh. So it is easy to lose sight that in most bibles a mere 60 pages leads us through 3 centuries of Israel's history. To put that in perspective in American history terms, that is the amount of time since the birth of Benjamin Franklin until today. It is the amount of time that begins 75 years BEFORE the Revolutionary War until

today. Imagine if all that history was condensed into about 60 type written pages, how precious little of what went on can actually be contained in it. Thus in addition to it being self-evident that in the bible we get little but the Cliffs Notes version of all that transpired in Judah and Israel during that time, we can also get the skewed impression of changes within Israelite society happening rapidly or even overnight when in fact they were from decades to hundreds of years in the making, and thus nearly imperceptible by those who were living in those times.

So in the ceremony that takes place in the first 3 verses of 2nd Kings 23, we need to try to mentally picture that when the Scroll of the Law of Moses was being read to those in attendance at this great convocation of rededication, the actual content of the Torah was almost unknown to them. These divine words felt new and very different (and no doubt not all that comfortable) from what it was they had been believing, practicing and observing for their entire lives. Yet at the same time these folks were convinced that they knew their God Yehoveh well, and knew His laws and commandments well, and could readily discern His will. But to dispute that commonly held (although mistaken) belief the prophet Jeremiah says that not even the foremost religious authorities of Judah who purported to teach the Torah to the people actually knew God or even sought out His Word. The common prophets of the time (of which there were hundreds) claimed by virtue of having attended and graduated from one of the several prophet's academies of that era that they had been anointed by God; but at the same time they also prophesied in the name of Ba'al, and for some strange reason a goodly portion of Judah (perhaps the majority) didn't seem to find fault with that notion or even question it.

Jeremiah 2:8 CJB

8 The cohanim didn't ask, 'Where is ADONAI?' Those who deal with the Torah did not know me, the people's shepherds rebelled against me; the prophets prophesied by Ba'al and went after things of no value.

How could this happen? It took a very long time; hundreds of years and over a dozen very bad kings, a priesthood that at first saw their status as a high calling that demanded their absolute purity and devotion to God, but in time came to see it as a profession that gained them status, popularity and a good living; prophets that enjoyed their celebrity and the attentive ears of the people more than their relationship with the Lord, and a citizenry that was content to merely do and believe whatever seemed convenient, customary, and currently in vogue. And what happened when an occasional true prophet of God (like Elijah or Isaiah) was sent to try to bring the people back to their senses; when they tried to bring God's oracle of correction to the leaders and to the public at large and tried to reintroduce God's true Word? They were run out of town; they were called killjoys who only sought to bash the beloved institutional Hebrew

religion; they were berated, shunned, beaten up and many were murdered.

If you still have trouble accepting that history is a predictably repetitive pattern, or that it is generally circular in its nature, then what I have just told you might be interesting but has no connection to you or to the world today or our collective future. However if you can see that because God never changes, then the divine principles and systems He puts in place never change, then it also becomes self evident that the historical patterns never change, they just repeat but in new and different contexts and circumstances. Thus here we are today in the 21st century, most who are listening claiming faith in the God of Israel and His Son Yeshua, and much of what was happening during Josiah's time seems to be repeating itself within the institutional Church and within Judaism; and yet it is vehemently denied especially by the leadership.

Jeremiah 2:20-25 CJB

20 "For long ago I broke your yoke; when I snapped your chains, you said, 'I won't sin.' Yet on every high hill, under every green tree, you sprawled and prostituted yourself.

21 But I planted you as a choice vine of seed fully tested and true. How did you degenerate into a wild vine for me?

22 Even if you scrub yourself with soda and plenty of soap, the stain of your guilt is still there before me," says Adonai ELOHIM.

23 "How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not pursued the ba'alim'? Look at your conduct in the valley, understand what you have done. You are a restive young female camel, running here and there,

24 wild, accustomed to the desert, sniffing the wind in her lust- who can control her when she's in heat? Males seeking her need not weary themselves, for at mating season they will find her.

25 "Stop before your shoes wear out, and your throat is dry from thirst! But you say, 'No, it's hopeless! I love these strangers, and I'm going after them.'

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Too many who are our leaders and teachers of God's Word barely know it, if at all. Rather they fall back on the writings of their religious leaders, books of doctrines and traditions, and say that these are same as the Word of God (or at least, these are all we really need to know to defend and uphold our denominational creed). Too many people who have had their yokes

and chains of slavery to sin broken for them by their faith in Messiah, and loudly proclaim “I won’t sin anymore”, quickly embrace the very things that God says “no” to in His Word. And when God puts someone in our life to correct us and take us back to God’s Word, and to point out that we are obligated to do what it says, and asks us to let go of the wrong things that have become comfortable and familiar to us and to our families and our neighbors, in the end all too often we say, “No, I love these strangers, so I’m going after them.”

Thus even though King Josiah had a pure heart that was constantly commended by God, and did exactly what he should have done in calling for a holy convocation at the Temple, and had the Torah read to the people verbatim, and asked that the people join with him in saying “Amen” to the Covenant of Moses, the reality is that most of the people’s hearts were far from God and simply went along to get along. No pilgrimage, no celebration, no declaration from our lips changes a heart; the journey begins from the inside and only then moves outward if it is a true journey of spiritual connection with the God of Israel.

Let’s begin reading today at verse 4 of 2nd Kings 23.

READ 2ND KINGS 23:4 – end

Recall that 6 years earlier from the time we are reading about now, King Josiah had ordered a similar program of removing and destroying idols, but somehow many of them had reappeared. We get no explanation for this; but then again, think about how much can happen in a mere 6 years. As an illustration: the devastation and fear caused by the financial meltdown of 2008 is already becoming a distant memory, and how the world wisely reacted to it with enormous and almost overnight changes in our behavior that involved paying off and swearing off debt, downsizing homes and cars, living more within our means, and increasing savings isn’t lasting. After only 5 years from that catastrophe, many have returned to running up the balances on their credit cards, saving next to nothing, making uneducated and risky investments to get a relatively little more return, and living like there will be no tomorrow. Did something in the worlds’ economies fundamentally change for the better in that timeframe that would cause us to reverse direction back to our frivolous and foolish ways of the near past? No. Our fearful emotions simply ran their course, our will to do what was right and wise no matter how difficult began to diminish, and the way we truly think at our core is surfacing again to cause our destructive behavior to return to what has become instinctive and usual. That was the case with Judah and the rather quick return of idolatry and idols after Josiah’s first attempt at ridding his kingdom of it.

The king instructed the High Priest and those of the level of priests immediately below him (the

2nd order), along with the gatekeepers (Levite non-priests) to do the work of removing from the Temple grounds the Ba'al idols, the Asherah poles, and all the paraphernalia associated with worshipping the sun, moon, and stars. What is perplexing is not that these particular folks would have been the ones ordered to perform the task (the priests and Levites were supposed to handle all matters associated with God's Temple), but rather that these same priests and Levites must have permitted and participated in erecting these idols in the Temple grounds in the first place. The only reasonable explanation I can come up with is that these pagan items had become mixed-in with standard, everyday Hebrew worship practices of Yehoveh, and no one even thought of them in terms of them being pagan or as idols or as wrong. The scholarly word for this anomaly is syncretism; it is the act of slowly, over time, borrowing rituals, practices, icons, symbols, and observances from multiple religions to add to your own. Then these new ways become the standard and the accepted way. Only after an extended period of time is it possible to look back and recognize what has happened; but by then it is invariably too late. A new normal has been created and the adherents of the affected religion are now stubbornly attached to these new ways, happy with them, and don't recognize them for what they are.

By way of application, just look to our current era and we find the same sort of process has occurred within our Christian faith over the centuries. Every now and then some group or another of Believers openly challenges these established and institutionalized traditions and customs. America was founded by a group we call the Puritans who openly challenged the syncretism of Roman-based Christianity, were persecuted for it, and fled Europe for the New World. Today the same questioning of how so many pagan traditions crept into our Christian faith observances, and what to do about it, has again emerged and of course it is being reacted to by the institutional Church in the same way as they did with the Puritans: with suspicion, anger and accusations of heresy. So I have little doubt that the offending cult items removed by the priests and Levites from the Temple grounds were only the result of having God's Torah actually presented to them (at the demand of King Josiah), and then the leadership requiring them to pay attention to, and actually obey, the Torah's terms and conditions. Even so, the results were primarily outward and the people and the priesthood quickly reverted when some time passed and the pressures to obey the Torah relaxed, and then especially upon Josiah's death.

We are told next that the combustible items were taken down into the ***Nachal Kidron*** and burned up to ashes. Anyone who has gone to Israel has been to Jerusalem, and you have seen the ***Nachal Kidron***, but today it is called the Kidron Valley. This is the valley gorge that runs along the eastern wall of the Temple Mount that separates it from the Mt. of Olives. ***Nachal*** means brook or stream. Our CJB says wadi, and that is not correct. A wadi is a mostly dry riverbed that only springs to life occasionally. But in Josiah's day, the Kidron had a constantly running stream of water through it, which is why so much religious ritual was performed there.

Then the ashes of these idols were collected and hauled off to Beit-El. Why Beit-El? Because this was the seat of the apostate form of the Hebrew religion that King Jeroboam had created for the 10 northern tribes, which incorporated the use of the Golden Calves as an image of the God of Israel. And it had been prophesied that the altars Jeroboam once used would be defiled.

Verse 5 says that **Yoshiyahu** deposed the “idolatrous priests” that the kings had appointed to burn offerings at the high places of Judah. These were probably not Levite priests, although most were probably Levites; only certain clans of Levites were authorized to be priests, while the others were to be Temple workers. The Hebrew word used is **Kemarim** (Hebrew priests is **cohanim** and cohanim refers to the priestly class). There is an interesting distinction made that the **Kemarim** who made offerings at the **bamot** (the high places) of the cities of Judah are different than some other **Kemarim** who made offerings to Ba'al and other gods. My point is that during the era of the kings, almost always when we hear of **bamot** (high places) these are altars built on mounds and hilltops that were dedicated to YHWH. So we have special priests (who likely weren't real priests at all) being officially authorized by the government of Judah, and sanctioned by the Hebrew religious authorities, to make offerings on countless altars all around Judah, made in the name of God, even though God says that only Levitical priests can make offerings to Him, and only at one place: the Altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. So neither group of the **Kemarim** was God-authorized. And then in contrast to this, there are other priests who serve the Ba'al's, the heavenly hosts, etc.

Do you get the picture of this diverse, anything goes, inclusive mindset of worship among the Hebrews in Judah as we approach their exile to Babylon? It was a made-up, makeshift faith that as far as anyone knew was what they were supposed to do because the leaders made it acceptable. And why did they think everything was OK? Because they didn't know God's Word, they didn't know the Torah, and they refused to take heed to the warnings of God's prophets.

All faith, any faith, as long as it was done for the sake of the spiritual, was generally OK. Any way one chose to worship the God of Israel was OK. Want to add a dab of paganism on the side? No problem. Because if you MOSTLY worshipped the God of Israel, or did whatever you did in the name of the God of Israel, and you see nothing particularly wrong in it, then Presto! It's not pagan anymore! And the residents of Judah seemed to dabble in just about all of it, and we don't hear one syllable about any disagreement over it among the population, or even of the Temple leadership questioning, let alone condemning such behavior or belief. Rather, just like in our day even in our churches and synagogues, tolerance was the watchword. Since love is always admirable then it doesn't matter what the nature of it is because Jesus

preached love. Marriage among anyone, of any sex, is OK because God authorizes marriage and likens it to our relationship with Him. Faith is good, and it doesn't matter what your faith is in, because Christ says it's important to have faith.

Verse 6 reminds us that Manasseh had installed an Asherah in the house of Adonai, meaning the Temple building itself. That was now removed and taken to the Kidron and then burned up and its unclean ashes thrown onto the graveyards (an unclean place). In verse 7 the list continues of the abominable things that were going on in the name of God: cult prostitutes were operating in God's house, and women wove articles of clothing that were put onto the Asherah pole. Cult prostitutes worked for the Temple authority. In some cases it was that ritual sex acts were performed before the Asherah pole (remember that the Asherah was the idol of Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility). In other cases girls were donated by their fathers to the Temple to be prostitutes; thus whatever money was earned from their prostitution the profits supported the Temple. The fathers felt that they were doing something pious in giving up their daughters to the Temple of God for this purpose, the men spent their money for legalized prostitutes AT THE HOLY TEMPLE so it wasn't looked down upon, and the money from the brothel went to the Temple authorities, so everybody was happy.

Some other group of priests (meaning priest to Yehoveh) were brought in from places outside of Jerusalem where they also sacrificed at private altars. It's hard to make a distinction between these priests and those of verse 5, but apparently there was one. My own speculation is that the priests of verse 5 were Levites, but not of the priestly clans, even though they were assigned the duty of being priests to the many *bamot* to Yehoveh. And whereas in verse 5 Josiah had the altars of those priests destroyed, the altars of the priests of verse 8 were NOT destroyed but merely defiled. Likely these priests were actually Levite priests from the priestly clans, so they were at least properly authorized to be priests to God. So what we have is essentially Levites practicing varying degrees of idolatry, although I think these degrees are purely manmade and philosophical, and so they are treated differently. Interestingly what we find is that although Josiah influenced the behavior of this last group of priests to stop what they were doing, and they were brought to Jerusalem to only do their ritual service for Yehoveh there, because of their previous idolatry (even though it was considered idolatry of a lesser degree) they were not allowed to participate in typical priestly functions such as sacrificing at the Altar of Burnt Offering in the Temple.

There were also other restrictions in that they were not allowed to partake of the holy food given for holy sacrificial offerings that because of its holy designation had to be eaten by the priests ONLY at the Temple building (they couldn't take this particular food home with them). But, these reformed priests would be allowed to eat unleavened bread at such occasions so as not to be completely isolated from their priestly brethren. And let me stress: the various distinctions, and assignments, and decisions, and consequences that are being revealed here

are not said to be God's instructions; they are simply what Josiah and his royal court decided upon. Thus we should take them as merely a statement of historical fact, not as a prescription for something we necessarily ought to do.

Verse 10 explains that the **Topheth** in the Ben-Hinnom Valley was desecrated. Today we call this the Gehinnom Valley, or just Gehinnom for short. This is a more or less east-west valley that intersects at an angle with the Kidron Valley. The **Topheth** was the formal name for the pagan shrine where children were brought to be passed through the fire (sacrificed) to Molech. The Rabbis say that the word **Topheth** is a word for drum, because as each child was offered drums were beaten in an increasing frenzy. Note that the **Topheth** was not destroyed, but in some unnamed way defiled; made ritually unsuitable for use. Why wasn't such an abominable thing destroyed? We don't know, but likely there were heavy political pressures that prevented it. We know from extra-biblical records that this same shrine was reinstated and active at the time of Christ.

Verse 11 says King Josiah confiscated the horses used for rituals to the sun god, and also had the chariots that were part of the ritual destroyed and burned. Next the altars on the roof of the upper room of some kind of tower that King Achaz had made were destroyed as well as some of Manasseh's idolatrous handiwork.

And still with all of this, there was more. Other high places and idols located on what is called the Mount of Destruction were desecrated. And we are given the sad reminder that these high places had been originally built by King Solomon, David's son, for the purpose of worshipping the Moabite God Chemosh, and the Ammonite God Milkom. And in the process whatever shrines and pillars were there, King Josiah smashed and then had them covered with human remains as the means of defilement.

The Mount of Destruction is actually a play on words of the Mount of Olives. Mount of Destruction is in Hebrew **har hammashit**, Mount of Olives (that literally ought to be translated as the Mount of Ointment) is **har hammisha**. So the idea is that the presence of all of these idols has turned the Mount of Ointment (a healing place) into a Mount of Destruction (an unclean and desolate place).

What we have to this point is what King Josiah did with all the inappropriate worship places

and cult articles and shrines in Judah and Jerusalem. What comes next is what he did in the former territory of the northern kingdom of Israel.

In order for us to get a more complete picture of what is happening, turn to 2nd Chronicles 34.

READ 2ND CHRONICLES 34:29 – 33

This of course is backing us up just a bit to the big ceremony at the Temple grounds. My purpose is that I want you to notice is in verse 32 where it says that Josiah had all the people in Yerushalayim **and Benjamin** to stand in affirmation of the covenant rededication. And what we see is that as of this time, Benjamin was fully affiliated with Judah, and considered part of Judah. So the people who were at this covenant ceremony were strictly Judahites, but that designation now included the tribe of Benjamin. But then verse 33 makes the brief comment that **Yoshiyahu** also removed all the idols from the territories belonging to the people of Israel (meaning the 10 northern tribes who were in exile in Assyria). This cements the historical reality that at this point Assyria had lost its ability to control this region that they had not so long ago conquered. And this opened the door for Josiah to extend his reach to the north.

Here's the thought I want to close with as a basis for what we'll study next time: King Josiah decided that even though the 10 tribes had been exiled to Assyria and elsewhere, there were some small remnant of those 10 tribes still living in the former northern kingdom, but those remaining Israelites had no king, no priesthood, and in a sense no religion. So since that region was still part of the Promised Land as far as he was concerned, King Josiah decided that it was only proper that he should be their king too. And in the next few verses we'll see how he extended his influence and the Torah reformation movement into the northern tribal territories, no doubt thinking to emulate Kings David and Solomon by making all 12 tribal districts into one unified Kingdom of God again. He never succeeded beyond destroying a few idols and altars.